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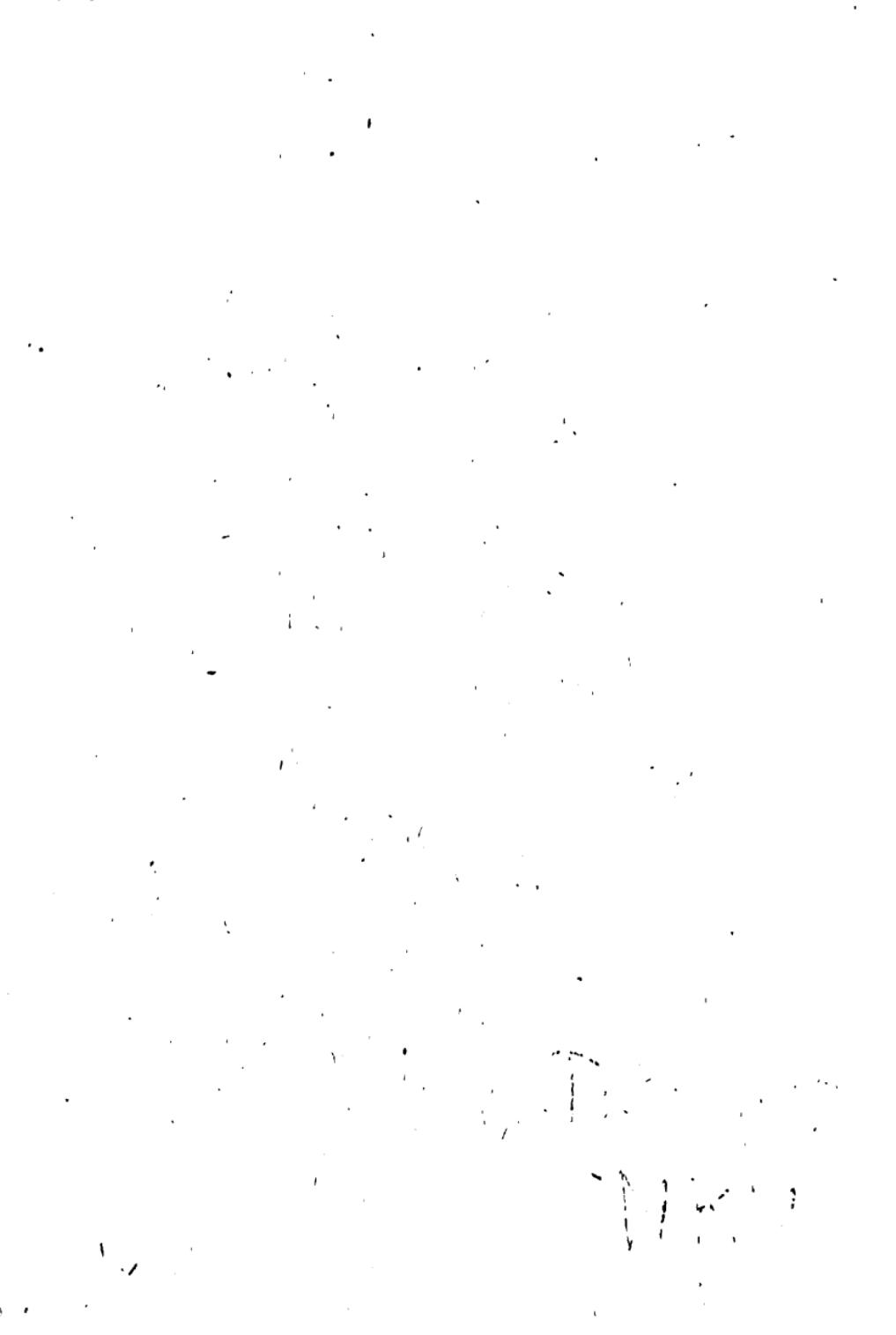
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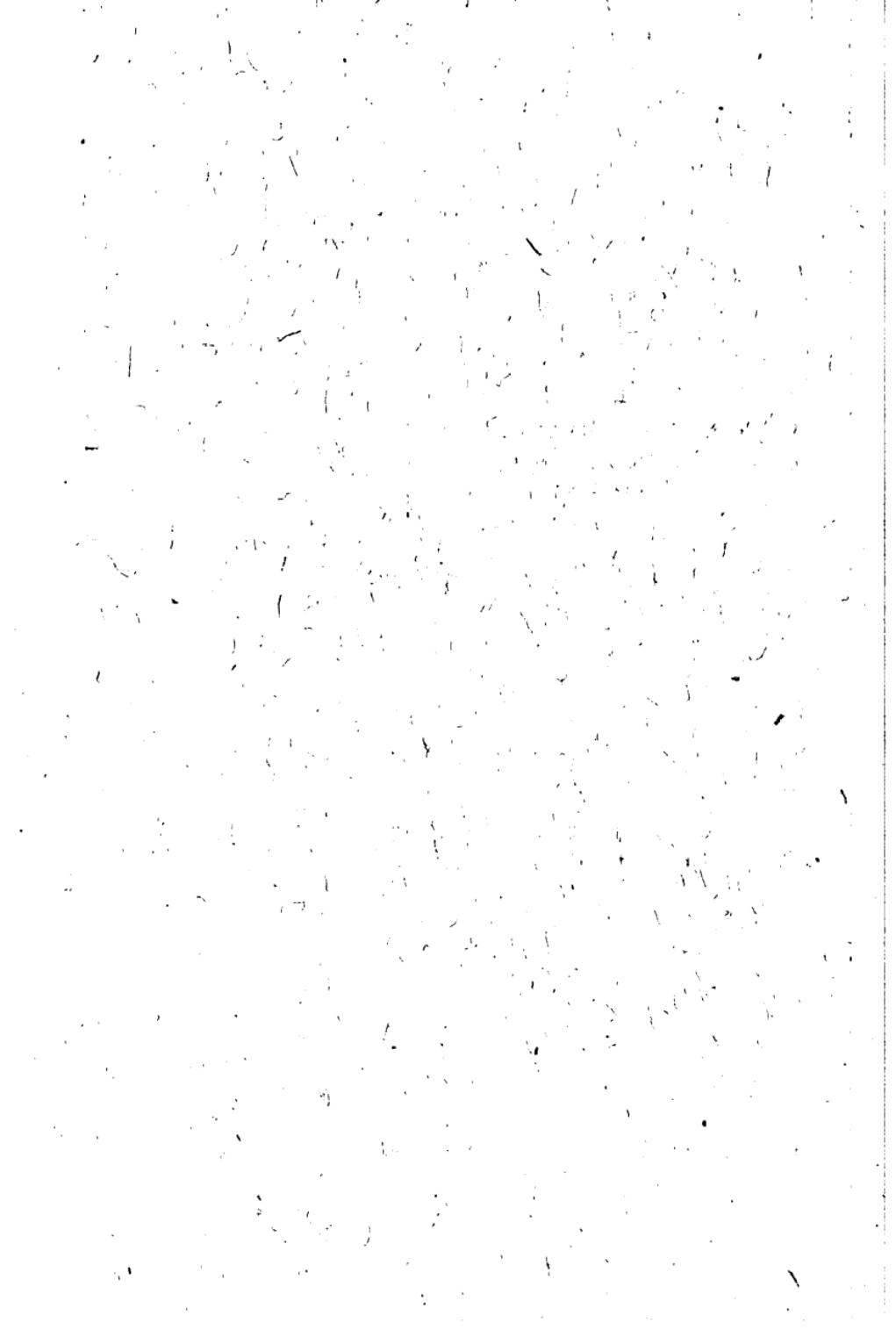
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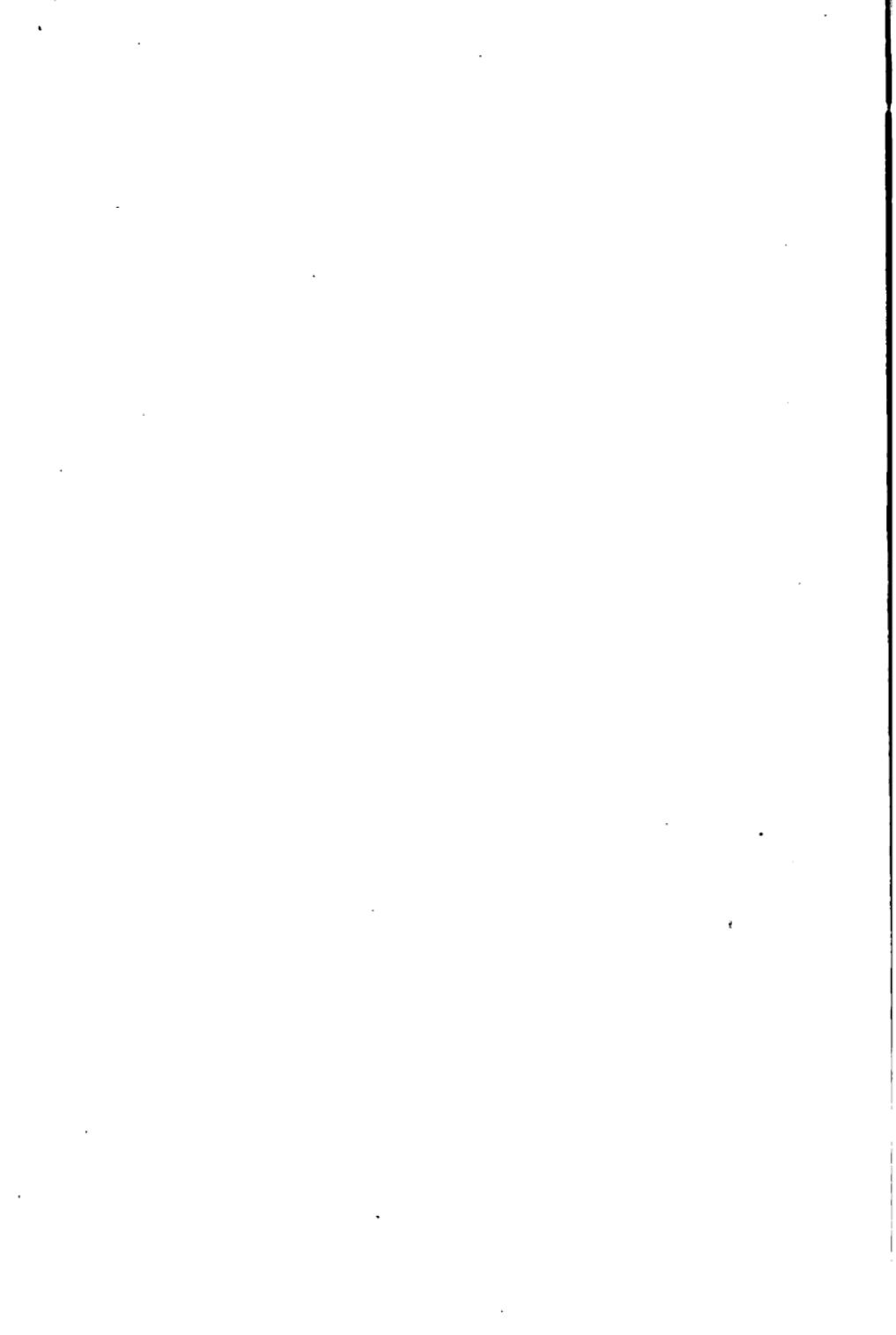


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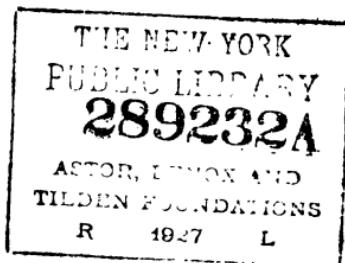
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S I D O N I E.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

A WEDDING-PARTY AT VÉFOURS.

“MADAME CHÈBE!”

“My dear boy?”

“I am so happy!”

It was certainly the twentieth time that day that William Risler had announced his excessive happiness. Always, too, in the same words, and in the same heart-felt tone—soft and low—indicating, to a close observer, that he placed a certain restraint on himself lest he should say too much.

Not for the world would the newly-made husband make an exhibition of himself—but his happiness choked his utterance, and made it difficult for him to speak. All that day he had, at intervals, whispered in the ear of his mother-in-law, “At last I am a happy man!”

For hours the poor fellow had feared that he was dreaming—that he had been fooled by an ecstatic



vision—but the hands of the large clock at Véfours pointed to ten, and he had not yet been roughly awakened. He lived over the events of the day: he saw himself in his simple bachelor's room; he had just placed in the pocket of his new coat two pairs of white gloves. A few hours later, the wedding-procession had started. In one of the many carriages he beheld a shimmering cloud of silk and tulle, that betokened the presence of the bride. Then came the entrance into church—two-by-two—following the floating white cloud; the organ, the priest, the benediction, the wax-candles, the jewels, and the spring toilets! Then the crowd in the vestry-room, where the small, white sylph was kissed and embraced by parents and friends, while he himself was warmly congratulated by the first merchants in Paris, who had assembled to do him honor.

Then the coming out again into the common world—the last triumphant peal of the organ swelling tumultuously through the widely-opened door of the church—the murmurs and comments of the crowd gathered at the entrance; even the words of a stout woman, wearing a large white apron—words unnoticed at the time—now returned to Risler.

“ Well, the husband is not much to look at, but the bride is a beauty! ” and the woman was right, he thought.

Then came a breakfast at the factory, where the huge room was gay with flowers; the drive in the Bois—a concession to Madame Chèbe, so true a

Parisian by birth and education that she would hardly have thought her daughter married without a visit to the cascade, and a glimpse of the lake.

Finally, the return to a grand dinner just as the street-lamps began to twinkle along the boulevard. He heard again the rattle of the carriages as the bridal procession drew up with a needless amount of noise and bustle before the private staircase at Véfours.

And now, worn out by happy excitement, Risler leaned back in his chair and quietly surveyed the large table, in the form of a horseshoe, around which were seated twenty-four familiar faces, in whose joyous eyes he read only the reflection of his own happiness.

Dessert had been served, and the fruits, flowers, and ices, gave color and light to the gay scene. A buzz of conversation filled the room ; some of the chairs were pushed slightly away from the table, and all was going on well.

Yes, Risler was content. With the exception of his brother Frantz, every soul for whom he cared in the world was near him. Opposite sat Sidonie—yesterday “Miss Sidonie,” to-day his wife and “madame.” She had laid aside her veil, emerged, as it were, from her white cloud, and her pretty, pale face, crowned by a wreath of orange-blossoms and heavy braids of hair, rose from the severe simplicity of her closely-fitting robe of white silk. In her eyes sparkled an air of latent rebellion, and about her mouth lingered an expression of discon-

tent; but newly-made husbands rarely read such signs aright.

Next to Sidonie and Frantz, the person whom Risler most loved was Madame Fromont, whom he always called "Madame George," the wife of his partner, and the daughter of the deceased Fromont, his former patron, and his hero and model. He had placed her next himself, and in his way of speaking to her one read at once the deference and tenderness with which he regarded her. She was a very young woman, about Sidonie's age, but of a better style of beauty, more quiet, more refined. She talked very little, feeling somewhat out of place in this mixed circle, though she was perfectly amiable, and well bred in her manner.

On Risler's other side sat Madame Chèbe, the bride's mother, who was dazzling to behold, in a robe of glossy green satin. All that day the good woman's thoughts had been as brilliant as her dress, and she had said to herself a hundred times, "My daughter marries Fromont and Risler." For to her mind it was not Risler alone whom her daughter married, it was the firm itself, so famous in Paris; and, each time that Madame Chèbe arrived at this conclusion, she drew herself up so erect that the silk of her waist creaked like the harness of a war-horse.

What a contrast to her husband, who sat farther off! This little man, with his glossy bald head, as round and as empty as a tenpin-ball, looked as furiously indignant as his wife was radiant; this, to be

sure, was but his usual expression. This evening he was not so shabby as was his custom, and his new black coat was a proper pendant to his wife's green satin ; but, unfortunately, his thoughts were as sombre as his coat. " Why had he not been put next the bride, as was his right ? Why had that place been given to young Fromont ? And why did old Gardinois, the Fromonts' grandfather, sit on the other side of Sidonie ? Of course, every consideration must be paid to the Fromonts and none to the Chèbes, and yet such people had the face to wonder at revolutions ! "

Fortunately, as a safety-valve for his indignation, the irate little man had next him his friend Dello-belle, a superannuated actor, who listened to his complaints with a majestic and unmoved countenance. A man may have been driven from the stage by the jealous machinations of managers, kept from it for fifteen years, and yet have in reserve many impressive attitudes and magnificent poses. So on this especial evening Dello-belle felt that much was expected of him, and he had adopted a half-smiling, half-serious air, at once condescending and solemn. One would have imagined him at a feast in the first act of a new play, assisting at a banquet where all the meats were of pasteboard. In fact, this absurd Dello-belle had precisely the air of playing a part, feigning to listen to what was said, but really meditating only on his reply.

Singularly enough, the bride, too, had a little of the same expression. On her young and pretty face

was to be detected a certain preoccupation, and occasionally a faint smile, as if she were talking to herself.

It was with this same faint smile that she replied to the not over-refined witticisms of Grandfather Gardinois, who was seated on her right.

“It is not quite two months,” continued the good man, with a boisterous laugh, “since this little minx, this Sidonie here, talked of going into a nunnery—a monastery, I fancy, would have suited her better!”

Every one applauded this poor joke of the old peasant, whose colossal wealth, as well as native shrewdness, inspired respect. Among the few he fancied was “little Chèbe,” as he called her; he had known her from infancy, and understood her thoroughly, while she in her turn was too recently endowed with wealth not to venerate riches, and treated him always with an odd mixture of veneration and coquetry.

To George Fromont, who sat on her left, however, her manner was very reserved. Their conversation was simply an exchange of civilities, and seemed like an affectation of indifference. Suddenly came the flutter and rustle of silks, the half silence, and the general indications of rising from the table, and above all was heard the shrill voice of Madame Chèbe addressing a cousin from the country, who was in an ecstasy of admiration at the calm dignity of the bride, who was at that moment standing, leaning on the arm of M. Gardinois.

“I tell you, cousin,” exclaimed the proud mother, “no one has ever yet been able to read the thoughts

or feelings of my Sidonie!" Then the guests with much laughter passed into the grand *salon*.

While the guests, who were invited only to the ball which was to crown the festivities, were assembling, and the orchestra were tuning their instruments, while the youths hovering in the doorway were mentally deciding with whom to dance, Risler took refuge in a smaller, darker, and cooler room, communicating with the *salon*. Sigismond Planus, his old friend, and the cashier for thirty years of the mercantile house of Fromont, joined him. They were alone, and could say a few words in comfort.

"Sigismond, old boy! I am perfectly happy!"

Sigismond wished to express his delight, but Risler gave him no opportunity of doing so. All the joy in the good man's heart bubbled to the surface, and he continued:

"Just think of it, Sigismond! Is it not astonishing that a pretty young girl like that could accept me? I know quite well that I am old and ugly, for I am forty-four. Many another she might have married, without counting Frantz, who you know worshiped her. But no—she wanted old Risler, and she has got him.

"It all came about, too, in such an extraordinary fashion. For some time I had fancied her sad and out of spirits. I feared lest some unfortunate love-affair caused this state of things. In vain did her mother and I talk it over together. We could think of no one whom she could possibly care a sou for. Finally, one morning, in came Madame Chèbe, all in

tears, to my office. ‘It is you, William, whom she loves!’ she cried. And so it was. Just think of that, my friend! And who ever heard of a man having two such strokes of good luck, following so close on one another, as I have had in this year? To be admitted into the house of Fromont, as full partner, with no capital but my brains, and to have Sidonie for my wife!”

At this moment a couple floated into the room, a youthful pair, alike handsome, alike young; wafted as it were on the intoxicating strains of the bewildering music. The bride was looking straight into the eyes of her husband’s partner, and the lips of both were moving rapidly as they whispered each in the ear of the other.

“It is false!” hissed Sidonie, fiercely, but still smiling.

“I swear it is true!” answered the young man, even paler than the bride. “My uncle insisted on it; he was dying, and you had gone. How could I resist?”

From afar off Risler looked at the pair in admiration. “How pretty she is! How well they dance together!” But, as the two caught sight of Risler, they separated, and Sidonie went directly toward her husband.

“You here?” she said. “Every one is looking for you. Why are you not in the ballroom?” and as she spoke she hastily retied his cravat, while Risler smiled out of the corner of his eyes at Sigismond, and was too delighted with the little hand

fluttering at his throat to notice the trembling of each slender finger.

“Give me your arm,” she said, and they entered the drawing-room together. Her long, white train made his badly-cut, badly-fitting coat appear still more awkward; but a coat cannot be made over like the knot of a cravat, and it was necessary to accept him as he was. Nevertheless, Sidonie had a moment of gratified vanity as she bowed to the right and to the left on their passage up the room. Unfortunately, it soon came to an end, for in the corner sat a young and pretty woman whom no one asked to dance. As soon as he perceived her, Risler at once went to her, and Sidonie found herself compelled to take a seat at her side. It is needless to say that this lady was “Madame George.” To whom else would he have spoken with this respectful tenderness? In whose hand but hers would he have placed his little Sidonie’s, as he said: “You will love her, will you not? You are so good, and she needs your advice so much—your knowledge of the world!”

“But, my good friend,” interrupted Madame George, “Sidonie and I are intimates already. We have every reason to love each other.” And her quiet, honest eyes looked frankly into those of her old companion.

Utterly ignorant of the ways of women, and in the habit of treating Sidonie as a mere child, Risler continued, in the same tone: “Take pattern by her, little one; there is but one Madame George in the world. She is just like her father, a true Fromont!”

Sidonie, with her eyes cast down, bowed without reply; but a slight shiver ran from the tip of her satin shoe to the smallest bud on her wreath of orange-blossoms. But the good Risler saw nothing.

The ball, the music, the lights, and the flowers, had intoxicated him; he thought every one as happy as himself, and knew and suspected nothing of all the rivalries and small hatreds that went on about him. He did not see Dellobelle, with his elbow on the chimney-piece, one hand on his hip holding his hat, waiting for the time to come to utilize his especial talents; nor did he notice M. Chèbe leaning against a pillar of the door, more furious than ever against the Fromonts.

“Oh, these Fromonts! Why should they occupy such a conspicuous position at this wedding? What had they to do with it?—and he, the father of the bride, had not even been presented to Madame George!”—and the little man cast enraged glances at his wife, who sat smiling in supreme content.

At this wedding, as at almost all others, the distinct circles jostled each other, but did not harmonize. Finally, one gave way to the other. “Those Fromonts,” who so irritated M. Chèbe, and who formed the aristocracy of the ball, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, a distinguished solicitor, and the old millionaire Gardinois, all retired about midnight, quickly followed by M. and Madame George Fromont. Then the bride, with her mother and Risler, slipped away, leaving M. Chèbe, who had recovered his spirits, to do the honors.

Through the deserted streets the bridal carriage rolled heavily toward the new home. Madame Chèbe talked much, enumerating all the splendors of this memorable day, dwelling especially on the dinner, the commonplace *curte* of which had been to her the epitome of luxury. Sidonie was half asleep in the corner of the carriage; and if Risler, opposite, did not say, "I am happy," it was because his heart was too full to speak. Once he attempted to take in his the little white hand that rested on the window, but it was quickly withdrawn, and he sat lost in silent adoration. Once the carriage stopped to drop Madame Chèbe at her own door, too narrow for the voluminous flounces of her magnificent dress. A few minutes later the coach drew up before the massive gates of an old hotel in La Rue des Vieilles Haudriettes, bearing, above the half-effaced coat of arms, a huge sign, on which, in letters of gold and blue, were to be read the words,

"WALL-PAPERS, AT WHOLESALE ONLY."

The bride leaned forward. Had not all the lights been extinguished in the enormous buildings surrounding the court, Risler would have seen the smile of triumph that irradiated the pretty, enigmatical, contradictory face.

The noise of the wheels was deadened by the fine gravel of an avenue which led to the small hotel of two stories. It was there, on the lower floor, that George Fromont lived, and the Rislers were to occupy the second. The house, simple as

it was, had yet an air of luxury that night, lent by the magnificent flowers and shrubs that lined the hall and staircase.

While Risler surveyed his new home in supreme content, Sidonie retreated to her boudoir. By the light of the rose-colored chandelier she first carefully surveyed herself in the long mirror, and then calmly turned to examine in a leisurely fashion each detail of this, to her, unwonted luxury. This examination over, she threw open a window and stepped out on a balcony. The night was clear and mild. By the waning light of the moon she saw the whole of the manufactory, with its thousand windows and numerous chimneys.

At her feet lay the small but exquisitely-kept garden. All around were black and narrow streets. Suddenly she started. Below, off toward the left, in one of the most wretched of all the crowded attics, she saw a window in the fifth story thrown widely open. She knew it instantly—it was the staircase window of the floor which her parents inhabited. How well she knew it! How many things the sight of it recalled! How many hours—how many days indeed—had she passed there, leaning from this window without a railing or a balcony, looking toward the manufactory! She fancied she could at that distance detect “little Chèbe’s” small head, set in the frame of the window; and all her past life seemed to unfold before her—her childhood, and, worse than all, the sad youth of a poor girl in the city of Paris.

CHAPTER II.

STORY OF "LITTLE CHÈBE"—THREE FAMILIES ON A FLOOR.

IN the crowded homes of the poor, the corridor and staircase are regarded by them as another apartment. The children play there, while the women gossip and the men smoke. When "little Chèbe" made too much noise, her mother would say: "You drive me crazy; go out on the corridor and play!" The child obeyed her gladly.

This same corridor was on the upper floor of an ancient dwelling. Economy of space had formed no part of the original plan—it was broad, with a high ceiling, and protected on the side nearest the stairs by a heavy iron railing; at one end it was lighted by a large window that overlooked all the other roofs and chimneys, and a little way off the green turf in the garden of the Fromont establishment lay cool and fresh among the dusty old walls and superannuated buildings.

There was little, to be sure, that was very gay in the prospect; still, the child liked it infinitely better than the outlook from the windows of her parents' rooms, which were always gloomy and

sunless, and wellnigh intolerable when it rained, and her father could not go out.

Ferdinand Chèbe was indolent, and always forming plans to make a magnificent fortune. At first he had imposed on his wife, but after repeated disappointments she learned to estimate him at his real value, and refused to attach any importance to his wild dreams. Of the comfortable little dowry, brought by her and wasted by him in foolish speculations, there remained but a mere pittance: a camel's-hair shawl, sacred to great occasions; the laces she wore on her marriage-day; and two diamond buttons, small enough, certainly, but still so brilliant that Sidonie often implored her mother to open the white-velvet case in which they had lain for thirty years or more.

M. Chèbe had been years seeking some active employment—his health, as he affirmed, not allowing him to lead a sedentary life. It must be acknowledged that in the early days of his married life, when his business was prosperous and money was plentiful, when he kept his horse and his groom, he was thrown from a carriage and severely injured. This accident had served ever since as an excuse for all his indolence. One was never five minutes with M. Chèbe that he did not say in a confidential tone, “ You remember the accident that happened to the Duc d'Orléans ? ” and he added, invariably tapping his own bald head, “ Precisely the same thing happened to me, my friend—precisely the same thing ! ”

Situation after situation had been abandoned as not lucrative or dignified enough, so that at the time of which we speak he was a burden to himself and to others. Every one can speak of the eccentricities of artists and literary men, but who can adequately describe the preposterous follies of a half-educated, unemployed shopkeeper? If a new street was being laid out, he felt called upon daily to inspect the progress of the workmen. No one knew better than he the specialties of the different shops, and sometimes Madame Chèbe, out of all patience at seeing the vacant face of her husband pressed against the window-panes, would say, as she ironed the house-linen: "You know the baker's shop, in such a street, where they sell such excellent cakes? Go and get a couple for dessert." So the husband sallied forth, slowly walked up the boulevard, went to the shop, and passed half the day in the street, returning in triumph, wiping his forehead, as he entered the house with the two cakes under his arm, for which he had spent a few pennies and the whole morning.

His wife made no complaint, though she honestly wished that he would make some money. The poor woman made no more than he, but she so thoroughly understood the art of saving it that absolute poverty had never yet entered their doors. Their rooms were always delicately clean, and the old furniture shone brightly under her care.

Opposite the Chèbe door were two smaller ones. On the first, a card, fastened by four small nails,

bore the name of "Risler, Designer of Patterns for Manufacturers," and on the other was a small sign, with this inscription in gilt letters :

"MADAME DELLOBELLE.

BEETLES AND HUMMING-BIRDS."

The Dellobelles' door was always wide open, and showed a large square room, where two women—mother and daughter, the latter almost a child—labored assiduously at one of the thousand small industries by which Paris supplies the civilized world with articles of taste.

At that time it was the fashion to ornament hats and ball-dresses with those brilliant beetles from South America, and with those dainty birds whose breasts glitter as if set closely with rubies and emeralds. This was Madame Dellobelles specialty.

A wholesale house, to whom the goods were consigned from the Antilles, sent them at once on their arrival to Madame Dellobelles. When the cover was lifted, a dull, dead odor, and a fine arsenical dust, filled the room. The beetles were piled one upon another; the birds were closely packed, each with its wings stretched on a bit of stiff paper. All these were to be mounted—each beetle must tremble on a bit of wire; the ruffled plumage of the humming-birds was to be smoothed, and two pearl beads inserted instead of the eyes that were no longer there; and each tiny creature must be made to assume a life-like position. The mother did her work under

her daughter's direction; for Désirée, though so young, had such exquisite taste, such originality of invention, that no one could arrange the birds as she could.

Lame from her infancy, in consequence of an accident that had in no way lessened the beauty of her refined face, Désirée had acquired, in consequence of her enforced immobility, a certain high-bred pallor, and her industry was of such a nature that the natural beauty of her white hands was uninjured. Her beautiful hair was always carefully arranged, and she passed her days buried in a large arm-chair, before a table that was covered with fashion-plates and birds of all tints, finding some compensation in the elegance of her employment for the poverty and anxiety of her life.

She knew that all these little wings would glitter at Parisian *fêtes*, and, by the fashion in which she would arrange her birds and her beetles, it was easy to divine her thoughts. On her sad and weary days the wings were widely spread, as if eager for a flight, fast and furious enough to bear the little creature far away from this poor abode, and petty cares and trials. At other times, when she was happy, the tiny things themselves looked radiant, like a very caprice of fashion.

Happy or unhappy, Désirée toiled on with unflagging energy; from sunrise until far into the night the table was piled with work. When daylight was gone, and the bell of the factory sounded its dismissal, Madame Dellobelle lighted her lamp,

and, after a light repast, the two resumed their labors.

The indefatigable women had but one aim—one fixed idea in life—and this was the dramatic success of Dellobelle.

From the unfortunate day that he had left a provincial theatre, to play comedy in Paris, Dellobelle had expected some manager, cleverer and less ignorant than others, to discover his genius and offer him a position worthy of his talents. Perhaps, in the beginning, Dellobelle might have found some employment in a third-rate theatre, but to such an idea he would not condescend to listen. He preferred, he said, “to wait, and to struggle!” And shall we show our readers how he struggled?

He passed his mornings in his chamber—often in his bed—rehearsing his former *rôles*, and his wife and daughter shuddered with terror, as they heard some tragic speech loudly declaimed. After a late breakfast the actor sallied forth, well brushed and perfumed, and wandered up and down the boulevards until night, his hat a little on one side, and a toothpick between his lips.

The matter of costume he regarded as of the highest importance. What manager, he asked, would engage him were he shabbily dressed and unshaven?

So his womenkind watched carefully that he lacked nothing, and you may imagine how many beetles and humming-birds they mounted daily to keep him in this resplendent condition.

But the comedian thought it all right. In his

opinion the privations and toil of his wife and daughter were so many sacrifices, not made for him, but laid on the altar of the unknown divinity, the coming manager.

Between the Dellobelle household and the Chèbe there was a certain similarity of position, but it was brighter and gayer with the Dellobelles, for their hopes and faith opened to them a possible future, while the Chèbes knew that for them there could be no amelioration of their lot; then, Madame Chèbe no longer believed in her husband, while her neighbor had never doubted hers.

And yet for years and years Dellobelle had interviewed all the dramatists of the great city, had waited on one manager after another, but had never succeeded in obtaining an engagement. A friend had succeeded in procuring his appointment as steward of a fashionable club, where good manners were an essential—and Heaven knows the actor had those—but all such propositions Dellobelle received with an heroic denial.

"I have no right to bid farewell to the theatre," said the great man.

From the lips of this poor fellow, whose feet had not trod the boards for many a long year, such words were irresistibly comic; but, after a glance at the pale wife and paler daughter, one lost all desire to smile; and to hear one or the other say, as they twisted the steel wire of their birds, "No, no, M. Dellobelle has no right to relinquish the theatre," was enough to bring tears to one's eyes.

Happy man ! idolized in his own home, saluted respectfully by the neighbors when he appeared in the street, for Parisians have an extraordinary predilection for the theatre, and a great regard for any one, however remotely, connected with it. And yet this great man contentedly went every Saturday evening to a milliner in La Rue Saint-Denis, a huge paper box under his arm, to carry home the work of his wife and daughter.

Even in executing this commission his manners and costume were so irreproachable that the young lady whose duty it was to receive him found it extremely embarrassing to hand him the week's wages, so laboriously earned and so small in amount.

On these evenings the actor did not dine at home ; the ladies never looked for him ; his excuse was always ready : he had met an old friend and invited him to dinner. He brought home the remainder of the money, to be sure, and sometimes a bouquet to Désirée, or a little gift to his wife. "A mere nothing," he said, loftily. Thus you understand how, notwithstanding the industry and the courage of these two women, and the fact that, though their labors were comparatively lucrative, they were often cramped for money, particularly at certain seasons of the year, when the gay world had left Paris, and their particular branch of industry languished.

Fortunately, Risler was near at hand, and always ready to serve his friends.

William Risler, the third tenant on that floor,

resided there with his younger brother Frantz, younger by fifteen years than himself. The two were natives of Switzerland, and their tall, manly forms and fresh complexions seemed to lend some of their own vitality to the dark and dreary house. The eldest was designer to the Fromont manufactory, and paid his brother's expenses at college.

When William first arrived in Paris, a stranger, and ignorant of the ways of cities, he gladly availed himself of the kind offers of assistance made to him by his new neighbors, Madame Chèbe and the Dellobelles. They gave him advice and recommended their own tradespeople, and altogether were invaluable to him. In a few months they all became as one family.

On *fête* days the brothers were always asked to the home of one or the other of their new friends; and it was no small consolation to the two exiles to find themselves welcome at the modest fireside and table. Risler's salary was so large, too, occupying as he did so important a position in the wealthy establishment of the Fromonts, that he was enabled to bestow on the Dellobelles many tangible benefits, and to enter the Chèbes' room laden with little gifts. This little Sidonie soon understood, and ran to meet him, climbing on his knees and boldly searching his pockets. Occasionally he invited them all to the theatre, and nearly every evening he went with Chèbe or Dellobelles to a brewery, where he regaled them with beer, a pipe, and stale *Pretzel*.

Pretzels and beer were his only vice, and his

greatest enjoyment was to sit between his two friends, joining in the conversation only with an occasional laugh or a nod of the head. Naturally timid and unable to express himself fluently, and conscious of certain provincialisms that clung to him still, he shrank from new acquaintances. His old friends absorbed him, while at the same time impressing upon him their immense superiority. According to M. Chèbe, no man who worked ten hours each day could by any possibility have at the end of that time any opinion worth offering to any one on any subject.

Sometimes the designer came in overwhelmed with care, meaning after an hour's repose to return to the factory and work all night. M. Chèbe's air of surprised contempt was an absolute study.

"I can't imagine a man of sense guilty of such folly," he would say.

Dellobelle was less fierce, but his supercilious condescension was equally amusing. Risler was thoroughly convinced of his own inferiority, and gently sought to induce his friends to pardon and overlook it by thoughtful attentions and kindnesses.

In each one of these three humble homes Sidonie Chèbe was always welcome and equally at ease. At any hour of the day she would rush into the Dellobelles' room, perch herself on the arm of Désirée's chair, and watch the rapid movements of the pale girl's fingers. When tired of this, the child would pounce on some discarded beetle, one which had lost a wing on its long voyage, or a humming-

bird whose feathers were hopelessly damaged; such being always preserved for her use. Already more coquettish than playful, the little girl would arrange them in her clustering curls, while *Désirée* and her mother smiled to see her standing on tiptoe before the old tarnished mirror. When she had studied herself sufficiently, *Sidonie*, craving more admiration, would gravely go and knock at the Rislers' door.

During the day only *Frantz* was there, busy over his books at his table by the window. *Sidonie*, holding her head very stiffly, lest her tiara should be disarranged, appeared on the threshold. Farewell to study! Everything must be abandoned to do honor to this princess from fairy-land, who came, crowned with shining jewels, to pay him a visit. It was droll enough to see this tall, overgrown youth absorbed by this eight-year-old girl, yielding to her caprices and whims; so that later, when he became madly in love with her, no one could fix the date when his passion began.

Petted as she was in these different rooms, there was yet many an hour when *Sidonie* gladly took refuge in the large window on the staircase. It was there that she found her greatest amusement; there that she contemplated a vague future.

The child watched the glittering windows of the huge factory-buildings, and the heavy smoke that at certain hours rolled from the chimneys and enveloped the gray walls only added the additional charm of mystery. The *Fremont* manufactory represented to her the acme of luxury and wealth, while the

swaying tops of the trees in the garden seemed to beckon her to the promised land, the country of her dreams.

She listened with intense interest to all that Risler would tell her—of his master, of his kindness, and his success in his business—and she watched with childish curiosity every detail of M. Fromont's home-life. The marble steps to the garden, the gilded aviary, the perfectly-appointed *coupé* in the courtyard, all were constant objects of her admiration. She knew the daily habits of the household; the hours for the dismissal of the workmen; the pay-day, when the cashier's lamp burned far into the evening; and Sundays, when the profound silence about the courtyard brought nearer the voices of Mademoiselle Claire and her cousin George, as they played together in the garden. From Risler she had acquired much information. "Show me the drawing-room windows," she said; "and now, which is Claire's sleeping-room?"

And Risler, charmed with this sympathetic infatuation for his dear manufactory, explained over and over again to the child the arrangement of the buildings, the position of the different work-rooms, and showed her the especial corner where his own office was situated.

Finally, one day, Sidonie penetrated to this paradise.

Madame Fromont, to whom Risler had often spoken of the intelligence and sweetness of his little neighbor, begged him to bring her there, on the

occasion of a children's ball that she was arranging for Christmas-week.

At first M. Chèbe gave a curt refusal. "He had been humiliated enough," he muttered, "by these Fromonts, whose name was never out of Risler's mouth. Besides, it was a fancy-dress ball, and he, unfortunately, did not sell wall-papers, and consequently could not afford to dress his daughter in costume." But Risler begged and entreated, promising to take everything upon himself, and at once proceeded to design a costume.

It was a memorable evening.

In Madame Chèbe's apartment Désirée Dello-belle presided over Sidonie's toilet. The room was littered with bright-colored draperies; pins and spools of cotton lay on the table. The little girl, in her short skirt of red flannel striped with black, stood grave and erect before the mirror. She was charming. The bodice laced with black velvet over a waist of muslin, and her long braids of chestnut hair fell from a broad-brimmed straw-hat. The somewhat ordinary details of Sidonie's costume were refined by the child's intelligent face and by her well-bred air. The little circle of friends were breathless with admiration, and, while some one went to call the actor, Désirée arranged the folds of the skirt, the bow of ribbon on the shoes, and seemed herself to be overjoyed at the thought of an entertainment which she should never see. The great man appeared. He made Sidonie repeat the profound courtesy which he had taught her, and showed

her how to enter a room, and to pay her respects to her hostess. It was truly droll to see the accuracy with which the child obeyed these instructions. "She has the blood of an actress in her veins!" cried the old actor, enthusiastically; and, without knowing why, that great blockhead of a Frantz felt ready to cry.

A year after this happy evening, had any one asked Sidonie what flowers decorated the rooms, the color of the furniture, the name of the waltz that she heard as she entered the house, she could have answered in turn each question correctly. She forgot nothing, not one of the costumes that whirled past her; she still heard the childish laughter, and the sound of the little feet on the waxed floor.

For a moment, as she sat on the red-satin sofa, and took an ice from the tray which an attentive servant held before her, she thought of the dark staircase, the small, ill-ventilated home of her parents, and it all seemed to her like a distant country left behind forever.

Every one thought her charming, and petted and caressed her.

Claire Fromont, a small marquise, in pink and blue, presented her cousin George, a magnificent hussar, who turned around every minute or two to see the effect of his sabretache.

"You understand, George, she is my friend; she is coming to play with us on Saturday. Mamma has invited her."

And in the joy of her happy little heart Claire embraced Sidonie with vehemence.

Nevertheless, the hour came to leave. Through the dark street—where the snow was silently falling—up the narrow staircase, and in the dull room where her mother sat waiting, the child still beheld the glittering lights of the ballroom.

"Was it beautiful? did you enjoy it?" questioned her mother, as she unfastened the brilliant costume.

And Sidonie, overwhelmed with fatigue, slept as she stood, and began an alluring dream then and there that lasted all through the days of her youth, and cost her many bitter tears.

Claire Fromont kept her word: Sidonie went often to play with her in that lovely garden, and examined at her ease the gilded aviary. She knew each corner of the huge factory, and played there many a game of hide-and-go-seek on a quiet Sunday afternoon.

Everybody loved her without her ever evincing much affection for any one. As long as she was in the midst of this luxury she was gentle and happy; but at home again with her parents, looking at the outer walls of the manufactory through the cloudy window on the corridor, she felt a pang of inexplicable anger.

Sometimes she drove to the Bois in that beautiful *coupé*, and occasionally she was invited for a week to the country-house of Claire's grandfather. Thanks to Risler, who was very proud of the girl's

success, she was always well dressed. Madame Chèbe spared no pains, and Désirée was always ready to employ in her little friend's service her own marvelous taste and ingenuity.

M. Chèbe, always hostile to the Fromonts, contemplated with contempt this increasing intimacy. The truth was, that he was never asked himself; but this reason he naturally never gave, and only said to his wife :

“Can't you see that the girl is always sad when she returns home, and that she passes hour after hour in idleness, looking out of the window ?”

But poor Madame Chèbe, so unfortunate in her marriage, had become improvident. She maintained that one must enjoy the present ; seize happiness as it passes, since often one has in life, for support and consolation, nothing but the remembrance of a happy childhood.

For once M. Chèbe was right

CHAPTER III.

STORY OF "LITTLE CHÈBE"—IMITATION PEARLS.

AFTER two or three years of intimacy, years in which Sidonie acquired with marvelous ease luxurious habits, and the gracious manners of the children of wealth, the friendship was suddenly broken up. For some time George had been away at school. Claire, in her turn, was sent, with a wardrobe fit for a queen, to a convent, and at the same time the question was under discussion in the Chèbe domicile as to Sidonie's future.

The two children promised to love each other always, and to meet every other Sunday. They kept their word, but, as the young girls grew taller and older, Sidonie began to understand the infinite distance that divided them, and her dresses seemed too plain for Madame Fromont's elegant rooms.

When the three alone were together, their friendship made their social relations equal; but visitors now often came—a companion from the convent, or some tall girl richly dressed, who was brought by her mother's maid to spend the day with Claire.

As she watched her ascending the steps, Sidonie felt a strong desire to run away at once. The stranger soon embarrassed her with questions.

Where did she live ? Had she a carriage ?

Hearing them talk of their convent, of their mutual friends, Sidonie felt that she lived in a world apart—a thousand leagues from theirs ; and a mortal sadness overwhelmed her, above all, when on her return home her mother spoke of entering her as apprentice to a Mademoiselle Le Mire, a friend of the Dellobelles, who had in a neighboring street an establishment for the sale of imitation pearls.

Risler thought well of this plan. “ Let her learn her trade,” said this kind heart, “ and by-and-by I will furnish her with capital to start her in business.” In fact, Mademoiselle Le Mire talked of retiring in a few years.

One dreary morning in November, her father took Sidonie to the fourth story of an old house—older and blacker than their own. On the lower door was hung, among twenty other signs, a small glass case, covered with dust ; within were some necklaces of imitation pearls, yellowed by time, and the pretentious name of Angelina Le Mire surmounted the whole.

What a forlorn place it was !—a narrow stairway, and narrower door ; a succession of small rooms, each sunless and cold, and in the last an elderly woman with a false front of curls, black-lace mitts, reading a tumbled and soiled number of a magazine, and appearing somewhat out of temper that she had been disturbed in this lively employment.

Mademoiselle Le Mire received the father and daughter without rising ; spoke at length of her lost

social position, of her father, and of a faithless agent who had run away with their fortune. She, therefore, became extremely absorbing to M. Chèbe, who felt a keen interest always in all such incidents. With difficulty he tore himself away, telling his daughter that he would come for her at seven in the evening.

The new apprentice was shown into the still empty work-room, and was placed before a large drawer of pearl beads, in which needles and scissors, bodkins and cheap novels, were thrown pell-mell.

Sidonie had only to sort the pearls, and to string them in little bunches of equal length, to sell to small merchants. The other young ladies, mademoiselle said, would soon be there, and would show her just what to do; and mademoiselle retreated to the farther room, where she spent her life reading romances.

At nine o'clock the work-women arrived, five tall, pale girls, faded and worn, miserably dressed, but with their hair exquisitely arranged, as is the custom among the working-classes in Paris.

Two or three talked, between their yawns, rubbing their eyes, and saying that they were dying for want of sleep. Then they went to work at a long table, where each one had her drawer and her tools. An order had just come in for some mourning ornaments, and they must hurry. Sidonie, who had been taught her duties by the head-woman, in a tone of infinite superiority, began to string mechanically a quantity of black pearls.

The others took no notice, other than an inquisitive stare, of the new-comer, and were soon deep in gossip over a marriage that was to take place that day at a church round the corner.

"Let us go," cried one dark-eyed girl. "It is at noon exactly; we shall have time."

And at that hour the five girls snatched their shawls and rushed down the stairs like a whirlwind, leaving Sidonie to eat from a corner of the long table the dinner she had brought with her. The girl thought it dreary enough, and her life intolerable.

At one, the work-women returned noisy and gay. "Did you notice the richness of that white silk? And the veil of real point? What luck for her!" And they continued to chatter in the work-room, as loudly as they had done in the church, where, unawed by the solemnity, they had examined each toilet in detail. A rich marriage, jewels, and fine clothes, were the themes of their discourse. But their fingers flew as they talked. The black walls of mademoiselle's close rooms no longer bounded their horizon. Their hopes and wishes had overleaped them. "If you were rich, what would you do?" said one. "Do? Why, I should have apartments on the Champs-Élysées, and drive in my carriage."

From her corner, Sidonie listened in silence, handling the black beads with the delicacy and precision of touch she had learned from Désirée. When her father appeared at night, he received

many compliments on her industry and skill. Henceforward, one day was like another; the only difference being, that some days she worked on white instead of black pearls, or she strung red beads that looked like coral, for Mademoiselle La Mire used only imitations and tinsel—and it was thus that "little Chèbe" took her first step in life.

For some time, the new apprentice, younger and better educated than the others, found herself in solitude among them. Later, as she grew older, she was admitted to their friendship and confidence, without ever sharing their pleasures. She was too proud to run through the streets to witness a marriage, and, when she heard of their suppers and their dances, she shrugged her shoulders with disdain. Our visions soar higher than that, Sidonie, do they not?

Sometimes, toward the end of the year, she was obliged to send her father home again without her, and remain with the others to finish some pressing work. Under the flickering light of the gas, these pale faces bending over their pearls, white as themselves, gave one the heart-ache. It was the same fragile brilliancy. They chatted of the theatre and masked balls, and the pearls rattled as they talked.

In summer the work was less hurried, and in the middle of the day the apprentices slept, or one of the girls borrowed a magazine from their mistress, and read aloud to the others.

But Sidonie cared little for romances; she carried

one in her own small head, infinitely more interesting than any she could hear read.

Nothing had obliterated her interest in the factory. Each morning, as she passed on her father's arm, she examined it carefully. At that hour the chimney belched forth thick volumes of black smoke. She heard the busy hum of the laborers, and the strong and rhythmical strokes of the machinery, and all these noises were confused in her memory, with the recollection of *fêtes* and of blue *coupés*.

“The child is not looking well, Madame Chèbe; she must have some amusement: next Sunday we will all go into the country!”

These parties of pleasure, arranged by the kind-hearted Risler for Sidonie's especial pleasure, only depressed her. In the first place, she was obliged to rise at four o'clock—for the poor buy all their pleasures very dearly. There is always something to be ironed at the last moment; a trimming to sew on; to rejuvenate the everlasting little lilac muslin, with white stripes, that Madame Chèbe conscientiously lengthens each year.

They start all together, the Chèbes, and Rislers, and the illustrious Dellobelle. Désiréé and her mother do not go. The delicate girl, mortified by her infirmity, prefers to remain in her arm-chair, and her mother stays with her child. Besides, she has no toilet in which to appear by the side of that great man, her husband; she would have destroyed all the effect.

At first, Sidonie was somewhat gay. Paris in

the early mist of a July morning, the stations filled by well-dressed crowds, the country seen from the car-windows, the exercise and the fresh air, the perfume of flowers, the green turf, all raised the young girl's spirits for a few moments, but her heart soon grew weary as she thought of the triviality of her amusement.

"It is always the same thing over and over again!" she said to herself. In fact, Sidonie found but one pleasure in these Sunday excursions; and that consisted in feeling herself admired, even by the simple rustics whom she met on the road.

Sometimes Risler, with his brother and "little Chèbe," deserted the rest of their party, and wandered into the woods and meadows, to gather flowers and trailing branches; these were to serve as models for his wall-papers. Frantz, with his long arms, pulled down a spray of hawthorn or climbed on a stone-wall to gather some wandering vine that pleased them by its careless grace. But it was by the side of a river or running stream that they found their richest harvest. For in the damper soil grew tall, flexible plants whose long, slender stems threw out luxuriant masses of leaves; and reeds of a rich brown, or a wild convolvulus with its bunches of bright-blue flowers. Risler grouped his leaves, his buds and flowers, as if Nature alone had done it, tying his bouquet with a wide blade of grass, and hung it over Frantz's shoulder, and on they went, Risler talking all the time of subjects and combinations.

“Look,” said he, “at that cluster of lilies of the valley, with its greenish bells, peeping through that branch of wild roses! Don’t you think it would have a pretty effect on a ground of pale gray?”

Sidonie cared little for lilies or roses. Wild flowers were but weeds in her eyes. She remembered those in the conservatory at Grandfather Gardinois’s, and thought of the rare plants growing in the majolica vases on the balcony. Those were the only flowers she loved, so you may fancy that she cared little for the country.

These recollections of the château de Savigny came to her at each step. If they passed a park-gate, she cast a lingering glance up the straight avenue. The green lawns, shaded by tall trees, recalled other trees and other lawns. These glimpses of unattainable luxury made these excursions infinitely dreary to her. But returning home utterly overwhelmed her. The small stations in the vicinity of Paris are on such evenings fearfully crowded and uncomfortable. But M. Chèbe was in his element; he bustled about, complained of a train that was delayed for two or three minutes, and threatened loudly to call on one of the directors. “Imagine,” he said in a blustering tone, “such a thing happening in America!”

And the noble actor answered with a shrug of the shoulders, “Precisely!”

The single word, thanks to the wonderful talent of the comedian, conveyed to the gaping spectators

the idea that the two men had just returned from a voyage around the world.

Seated by Frantz's side, his enormous bouquet half in her lap, Sidonie remained for a long time absolutely silent; contemplating the black masses of trees against the skies, a long country road, and the crowd that came and went occasionally through the glass doors of the waiting-room, the young girl caught a glimpse of a train that flashed by without stopping; then came the one that her party was to take, and they hastened to find seats. How dusty and uncomfortable it all was!—the tumbled, soiled dresses of the women, the men red and warm. A thick white dust obscured the one lamp, and hung like a mist over everything. Sidonie pushed up the window at her side, and fixed her eyes on the long rows of trees as they glided past. Soon, like countless stars, they saw before them the street-lamps of Paris. This melancholy day of pleasure was at last over, and each member of the now silent party began to think of to-morrow's toil. Sidonie rebelled at this contemplation, and envied the rich, to whom each day brought fresh amusements; and vaguely, as in a dream, peopled the fair avenues she had seen, with a crowd of well-dressed men and women, who were amusing themselves by watching the citizens who, in the face of heat and dust, and so much discomfort, had persisted in seeking a holiday.

From her thirteenth to her seventeenth birthday, such was Sidonie's monotonous life. Madame

Chèbe's cashmere shawl was a trifle more worn, and the lilac dress was irretrievably shabby; these, and an additional inch to Sidonie's height, were all the changes. Frantz now treated the girl with silent adoration, which she alone, of all their little circle, failed to detect. Nothing interested her; she performed all her duties silently and mechanically.

Frantz, on the contrary, worked with singular energy; it was easy to see that he proposed to himself some end and aim, and succeeded so well that at twenty-four he received a government appointment.

On the evening of that day Risler invited all the Chèbe family to go to the theatre. He and Madame Chèbe exchanged a constant succession of nods and signs. On coming out, Madame Chèbe resigned Sidonie to the care of Frantz with an air that seemed to say, "Now, settle it all between you—it is your own affair."

And the young lover was quite ready. The walk was a long one, so Frantz began by speaking of the play. "I like those," he said, "in which there is some sentiment; don't you, Sidonie?" he asked.

"I don't care," she answered, "what the play is, if the dresses are pretty."

In truth, at the theatre she thought of little else, and the scene simply inspired her with a wild longing for wealth and power, and she took away with her only new models for a dress, or for the arrangement of her hair.

The exaggerated toilets of the actresses, their very walk and attitudes, absurdly conventional, seemed to her the perfection of elegance and distinction. The crowded house, the carriages at the door, all delighted her.

Her lover continued :

"How well they played that love-scene!"—and, as he uttered these words, he bent tenderly over the pretty little head in its white hood.

Sidonie sighed: "Ah! yes, the love-scene. The actress wore superb diamonds."

There was a moment's silence. Poor Frantz had some difficulty in explaining himself. The words he sought came not at his bidding, and he felt himself growing very cowardly.

"I will speak," he said to himself, "before we turn the next corner."

But Sidonie began to talk on such indifferent subjects that his declaration froze on his lips.

At last he said suddenly :

"Listen to me, Sidonie—I love you—"

This same night the Dellobelles had sat up very late. It was the habit of these courageous women to make their hours of toil as many as possible, and their lamp was the last to be extinguished in their quiet street. They always waited for the return of their hero, for whom they kept a small, comforting supper hot.

When he was playing—years before—naturally and wisely enough this habit had been adopted, for

he was obliged to dine early and lightly. But Dello-belle had not played for a long time; yet, having no right, as he said, to relinquish the theatre, he carefully retained the habits it necessitated, of which this hot supper was by no means the least agreeable. To retire without it would have been to admit himself conquered—to relinquish the struggle! The night of which we speak, the actor had not yet made his appearance. The two women were at work, and talking cheerfully, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour. All the evening they had talked of nothing but Frantz, of his success, and of their joy therein, and of the future that opened so brilliantly before him.

“And now,” said Madame Dello-belle, “we must look up a nice little wife for him.”

Such was also Désirée’s idea. “His happiness would be quite certain should he marry a good little woman who is not afraid of work, and who would devote herself to him.” And Désirée spoke as if she knew such a woman intimately. “She is only a year younger than he,” she added, meditatively.

“Pretty?”

“No, not precisely,” answered the girl, slowly. “But no one knows save myself how much this woman loves Frantz, and how she has thought of him for years and years; while he, stupid boy, had only eyes for that little foolish kitten, Sidonie. But it will all come right some day; love is never thrown away.”

And the lame girl smiled softly to herself as she bent over her work, and started off on one of those

marvelous journeys to an imaginary world, whence she always returned a happy wife on the arm of Frantz. Even her fingers shared the radiance of her dream, and the little bird whose wings she was spreading looked as if he had just arrived from a tropical land of fruit and flowers.

The door suddenly opened.

"Do I disturb you?" asked a triumphant voice.

The mother, half asleep, started up.

"Ah! It is only Frantz—come in. You see we are waiting for papa. These artists, you know, are always irregular in their hours. You will wait and sup with him?"

"No—thanks," answered the youth, whose lips were still white with emotion, "I will not wait; I saw your light, and came only to tell you—to inform you of a great piece of news, because I know you love me—in short, I have come to tell you that Frantz Risler and Sidonie are engaged."

"Just as I was saying to Désirée that you only needed now a little wife to be perfectly happy," cried Madame Dellobelle, congratulating the young man heartily.

Désirée could not speak. She bent her head lower over her work, and as Frantz was absorbed in his own happiness, and her mother had eyes only for the clock, no one saw the young girl's emotion, nor her sudden pallor, nor noticed the violent trembling of the little bird in her fingers, whose wings drooped and head fell on one side like a creature wounded to death.

CHAPTER IV.

STORY OF "LITTLE CHÈBE"—THE FIRE-FLIES OF SAVIGNY.

"SAVIGNY.

"DEAR SIDONIE: Yesterday we were at table, in the large dining-room you once knew so well. I was out of spirits! Grandpa had been out of temper all the morning, and mamma hardly dared to speak. I was thinking that it was a great pity to be alone there, in such a lovely spot.

"George comes only occasionally, and then very late—merely to dinner—and returns the next morning with my father before I am up; besides, my cousin has become a man of business in these days.

"Suddenly grandpa turned to me—'What has become of that little Sidonie?' he asked, abruptly; 'I should like to see her here again.' You may imagine my delight! How much I have to tell you—how much to show you! You will cheer us up, my dear, and I assure you we all need something of the kind.

"Savigny is only a lovely desert. In the morning I make my toilet with the greatest care—and for what? That the swans may admire me, or the cows, feeding in the distant meadows. Then I rush to my room, throw off all my finery, put on a linen dress, and feed the chickens and ducks. Happily the hunting-season is near at hand, and I look forward to that as some amusement. George and my

father will both be here more, and you too—for you are going to answer at once, and tell me what day to expect you. M. Risler said you were not at all well, and the air here will do you a world of good.

"Every one expects you, and I am dying with impatience.

"CLAIRES —."

Her letter was finished, and Claire Fromont put on her wide-brimmed hat, for the August sun was very hot, and went herself to place it in the little box on the park-gate, from which the postman would take it the following morning. No kindly breeze whispered in the girl's ear a warning to prevent her sending that fatal letter, and she hurried back to the house to prepare for Sidonie a pretty room next to her own.

The letter reached its destination, arriving in Paris the next morning, and was duly delivered to Sidonie. What an event it was! They all read it over and over again, and for the next week it lay on the chimney-piece with Madame Chèbe's more precious relics of the past. To Sidonie it was like a romance full of enchantment and of promise. There was no talk of her marriage now—every one was absorbed in her toilets for the château; every one was busy in cutting and sewing, while she herself was all the time occupied in trying on her new dresses. Unfortunate Frantz! How all these preparations made his heart ache! This visit to Savigny would postpone his marriage. It was in vain for him to oppose the plan, and he saw Sidonie slipping

each day, as it were, from his grasp. Once at Savigny, who could say when she would return?

It was to the Dellobelles that the unhappy lover went with his melancholy forebodings; and he never noticed how Désirée, as soon as he entered, made a place for him at her work-table, with eyes cast down and scarlet cheeks.

For several days the beetles and birds had been laid aside. The mother and daughter were embroidering some rose-colored flounces for a dress of Sidonie's, and never had the lame girl sewed more diligently, for she inherited much of her father's hopeful heart and powers of self-deception.

While Frantz told her of his disappointment and of his fears, Désirée thought only that, were Sidonie once far away, he would fall into the habit of coming to her for consolation. Perhaps, too, a happy night would come when, as they sat alone waiting for "papa," Frantz would realize the difference between a woman who adored him and one who merely permitted herself to be adored.

Consequently, the impatience she felt for Sidonie's departure lent to her needle such extraordinary velocity that Frantz watched the ruffles and ruches piling up about her with almost a feeling of hatred—for Sidonie's departure was only delayed until the rose-colored dress was finished. When the last stitch was taken, *Mademoiselle Chèbe* left for Savigny. The château, built in the time of Louis XV., had an air of sombre magnificence. It stood in the centre of a large park, and the trees surround-

ing it were superb; but the chief charm of the spot was a lovely river that ran through the grounds. Unfortunately, the manners and appearance of the present proprietors did not correspond with the aristocratic air of the château.

The wealthy tradesman, after buying the estate from its impoverished owners, cut down many of the trees "to open a view," and then built a high wall to keep out intruders. But his tenderest solicitude was lavished on his vegetable-garden.

Of the *salon*, whose white panels were finished in a masterly manner by the greatest painters of the day; of the lake, whitened by water-lilies; of the grottoes and bridges, he thought nothing, save when his guests went into ecstasies over them. Advanced in years, he could neither hunt nor fish, and passed his time in superintending the most minute details of this enormous property. The grain with which the poultry was fed, the number of bundles of straw piled in the barn, served him to scold about for a long summer's day. And certainly, when one beheld from afar off this beautiful spot, the shining river and green turf, the trees and the flowers, one would never have suspected the meanness and narrow mind of its owner, who lived there throughout the year, the Fromonts spending only their summers with him.

Madame Fromont was of a gentle nature, but dull and without cultivation, intimidated from her birth by her father's brutal disposition. She was afraid, too, of her husband, whose goodness and con-

stant indulgence had never succeeded in winning the entire confidence of his wife. Having always been kept in utter ignorance of business-matters, they had grown rich almost without her knowledge, and without the smallest desire on her part to profit by it. Her superb apartments in Paris and her father's château were equally a burden to her. She always gathered her skirts about her closely, and made it her study to take up as little space as possible. She had but one passion, one pursuit in life: she was simply deranged on the subject of cleanliness and order, and brushed and dusted, polished and rubbed, everything she could get hold of.

When she could find nothing else to clean, this singular woman took out her rings and chains, rubbed down her cameos and loosened her jewels from their settings. At Savigny she amused herself by picking up the twigs in the avenue, by digging out the moss between the stones with the point of her umbrella, and would have liked to dust the very leaves on the trees.

M. Fromont had no attachment for Savigny, and only Claire loved the beautiful park. She knew its every corner, and had her favorite walk, her own tree, under the shade of which she read or sewed. She spent the whole day in the air, and went into the house only when summoned by a bell to her meals. In the folds of her dress lingered the freshness of the summer's day; and her soft, limpid eyes seemed to reflect the sparkle and glitter of the lake near which she had wandered in solitude.

The beauty of the place elevated her thoughts above the vulgar routine of the day. Her grandfather might fret and fume before her for hours together ; he might tell her anecdotes of the duplicity and indolence of the servants and tradespeople. Her mother might enumerate all her griefs, and complain of the ravages made by moths and mice, by dust and dampness ; but not a syllable was remembered by Claire. An hour by the river-side, or a rapid walk on the turf, and her mind was again calm and her temper unsoured.

Her grandfather regarded her as a creature totally out of place in his family. When a mere child, she annoyed him by a certain steadfast look in her big gray eyes, and by a way she had of settling every subject by the question, "Is that right ?"

"She is just like her father," he said to himself one day, "just as haughty and eccentric as he."

"Little Chèbe" was very much more to his taste. In her he recognized a kindred soul, a nature as ambitious and unscrupulous as his own. The young girl flattered him in a hundred adroit ways. Her frank adoration for his wealth, her outspoken longings for riches, were a constant delight to him. She amused the old man, too, by certain slang phrases, reserved for his hearing alone, and which acquired additional piquancy heard from her dainty lips.

When Sidonie arrived, after a long absence from Savigny, with her fresh and simple costumes, her hair dressed in the extreme of the mode, her

pretty figure and intelligent, mobile face, she had a great success. Old Gardinois was astonished to see this tall young girl, instead of the child he had expected, and thought her infinitely more attractive than Claire. Sidonie had both grace and style; but she lacked the calm beauty of her friend, the purity of expression, the sweetness and repose of manner, that characterized Claire.

Sidonie's grace, like her costume, was of inferior quality. The material was often imitation, always cheap, but made up in the newest style.

The girl was radiant as she drove up the avenue. She had been in a dream of delight all the morning. She took in each luxurious detail. The liveried servant who opened the carriage-door, the glitter of the dinner-table with its silver and glass, the hot-house flowers, even Madame Fromont's indolent way of giving orders to the obsequious maid, delighted her.

Ah! yes; this was living, indeed! This was the existence for which she was made! In a day or two she almost forgot that she was a stranger, and looked on this luxury as her own. Suddenly, to arouse her from her dream, came a letter from Frantz, that recalled her to the reality of her position, and to the fact that she was about to marry a poor man who would install her in a dark and dreary home.

Should she break off her marriage?

She could do so, of course, but might she not regret the step afterward?

In that small head many singular ideas had taken firm root. Sometimes she contemplated Grandpa Gardinois, who in her honor had abandoned a certain old vest and gaiters, with a very singular expression. "Ah! if he were only some twenty years younger!" she said to herself. But this notion of becoming Madame Gardinois did not last long. A new person and a new hope entered upon the scene.

Since Sidonie's arrival, George Fromont, who before had visited Savigny only on Sundays, had taken up the habit of coming daily to dinner.

He was a tall, slender fellow, distinguished in appearance and manners; an orphan, he had been brought up by his uncle, M. Fromont, who intended that he should be his successor in business, and also that he should marry Claire. This future, so carefully arranged for him, deprived him of all ambition. From the first he disliked the manufactory; as to his cousin, there existed between them a certain intimacy, arising from common tastes and interests, to say nothing of early companionship. But there was no love—on his side, at all events.

With Sidonie he felt at once timid and anxious—anxious to produce a good impression, and too timid to succeed. She was precisely the person, with her studied graces, to please a nature like his; and it was not long before she understood the cards she held in her hands.

When the two young girls sat on the bank of the river, it was always Sidonie who listened for

the whistle of the coming train, and George's first look was for her who remained a little in the background, but who, by her studied attitude and conspicuous costume, seemed to demand attention. There was no word of love between the two, but every smile and glance was full of silent avowals and encouragement.

One heavy, lowering evening—the air was full of rain and the heat very oppressive—the two friends left the table as soon as dinner was over, and paced up and down the avenue. George joined them and the three chatted on indifferent subjects, while the sand and pebbles grated under their slow steps. Madame Fromont called Claire, and George and Sidonie were left alone. They continued to walk together in the darkness, their only guide being the white gravel of the path. They did not speak to each other.

A damp soft wind blew in their faces. The little lake rippled and dashed in minute waves against the arches of the stone bridge. The acacias and lime-trees filled the air with their perfume, and a cloud of their blossoms fell around them. The air was full of electricity; they felt it, too, within themselves; their eyes flashed, as did the lightning on the distant horizon.

“Look at those lovely fire-flies!” cried the young girl, embarrassed by the long silence.

All over the lawn glittered the small, greenish lights. She stooped to take one on her finger.

He came and knelt at her side; close together

they bent over the turf, and looked at each other by the light of the fire-flies. How strange and lovely she was in that singular reflection which illuminated her forehead and rippling hair ! He threw one arm around her, and, suddenly feeling that she yielded to his embrace, he pressed a long kiss on her lips.

"What are you looking for ?" asked Claire from the deep shadow behind them.

George could not speak, but Sidonie rose from her knees with the greatest calmness, saying, as she shook out her skirts :

"Fire-flies only—see how many there are to-night, and how they glitter !"

Her eyes glittered, too, with extraordinary brilliancy.

"It is the coming storm, probably," murmured George, still struggling to restrain his emotion.

In fact, the storm was close at hand. In a moment a whirlwind of dust and dead leaves flew from one end of the avenue to the other. All three ran into the house.

George tried to read a paper, while Madame Fromont cleaned her rings ; the young ladies occupied themselves with their embroidery ; and M. Gardinois played a game of billiards in the next room with his son-in-law.

How long this evening seemed to Sidonie ! She had but one desire, and that was to be alone, free to think her own thoughts. But in the silence and darkness of her own room what transports of joy filled her soul ! George loved her—George Fro-

mont, the heir of the great firm! They would be married, and she should be rich. For in this little venal nature the first kiss of love had awakened only thoughts of ambition and luxury.

In order to assure herself of her lover's sincerity, she tried to remember each detail of the brief scene in the avenue—the expression of his eyes, the ardor of his embrace, and the words that he uttered as he pressed his lips to hers. Ah! why had not the fire-flies shown her his heart as well as his eyes? All night they danced before her closed eyes; the park was full of them. Sleepless she looked from the window—the very air was radiant with the tiny creatures, and she fancied them fairy torches assembled to do honor to the marriage of George and herself.

The next day when she rose her plans were complete. George loved her—that much was certain. Would he marry her? Of that our little worldling was by no means sure; but that doubt did not alarm her. She understood the nature with which she had to deal, and was convinced that the proper amount of resistance would enable her to manage the affair much as she pleased.

For some days she was cool and absent—voluntarily blind and deaf. He wished to speak to her, but she avoided him. At last he wrote.

He should hope, he said, to find a reply in a fissure in a rock at the extreme end of the park.

Sidonie found this idea delightful. That evening it was necessary for her to equivocate and ma-

œuvre so that she might go alone to the designated spot, where she hoped to find a note instead of depositing one.

She was not mistaken. She found a letter damp with the dews of the evening, and so white in the darkness that she hid it quickly lest she should be surprised.

Then, when she was alone, what joy to open it—to decipher its minute characters, to see the words that to her dazzled vision seemed to be surrounded with blue and yellow circles, as when one gazes at the sun in noonday!

"I love you!—Love me!" wrote George.

At first she did not answer; but, when she felt that the game was hers, she wrote simply, "I will love no man but my husband."

CHAPTER V.

HOW "LITTLE CHÈBE'S" STORY ENDS.

SEPTEMBER arrived, and with it a large number of guests at the château. They were mostly vulgar rich people, and among them no one who especially interested Sidonie. The days were beginning to shorten perceptibly, and the evenings were damp and chilly, so that the sportsmen were glad to drive back in their carriages, and, after a hurried toilet, assembled in the well-lighted drawing-rooms.

Claire Fromont was very reserved and quiet, annoyed by the distasteful assembly in which she found herself. But Sidonie was quite in her element. Her complexion and eyes were more than ordinarily brilliant, and the admiration of the people about her was very openly displayed. Her success finished George's infatuation; but the more he advanced the more she retreated. From that moment he swore she should be his wife. He swore it to himself with that exaggeration of repetition which characterizes those weak natures who determine to fight in advance with those objections to which they are conscious that one day they will yield.

This was the most glorious moment of "little

Chèbe's" life. For, above and beyond her ambitious projects, her insincere and coquettish nature prized this clandestine love-affair that she was bringing to so triumphant a conclusion.

No one suspected anything of it. Claire was at that healthy and charming season of youth when the mind, but half developed, sees only what is spread widely open, and suspects no concealments or treachery. M. Fromont thought of his business, his wife of the dust among her jewels. It was only M. Gardinois whom Sidonie feared, and, "after all, if he were to suspect anything," she said to herself, "he is not the man to betray me." She triumphed, when suddenly a catastrophe, totally unforeseen and unsuspected, came to destroy all her hopes.

One morning M. Fromont was brought in mortally wounded; he had received the full charge of his own fowling-piece in his temple. The château was in confusion, and the party dispersed in every direction. Claire, crazy with grief, was in her father's room, when Risler, informed of the catastrophe, came to take Sidonie away. On this last evening she had a final interview with George—an interview saddened and solemnized by the near presence of death. They promised to love each other always, and agreed on some plan of correspondence, and then they separated.

Sidonie returned home under the care of Risler, who was in despair; for the death of his master and friend was to him an irretrievable loss. She

was compelled to give to her mother and the Dello-belles each detail of her visit, to enumerate the *fêtes* and the toilets, and, finally, to describe the sad disaster at the end. The pain and agony this cost her no one ever knew, nor her longing for silence and solitude.

Frantz took his old place at her side, and his words and tender looks drove her nearly mad; for the youth naturally claimed certain rights as her accepted and impatient lover, and Sidonie shrank from even the touch of his hand. The day arrived at last, however, when indecision was no longer possible. She had promised to marry Frantz when his salary was raised. He came to announce that this was now done. She must marry him, or give him a reason for her refusal. In this dilemma she thought of Désirée. Although the lame girl had never opened her heart to her, Sidonie thoroughly comprehended her love for Frantz. Had the circumstances been different, the knowledge, perhaps, that another woman loved her *fiancé* would have made him more endurable to Mademoiselle Chèbe. Just as we place statues on tombs to render them less sad, so did the pale, pretty face of Désirée on the threshold of Sidonie's dismal future make it appear less dreary and hopeless.

But now she grasped at this, as furnishing an easy pretext for releasing herself from her promise.

"It is impossible, mamma," she said, one day; "I will never consent to make Désirée so unhappy. Have you not noticed that, ever since my return,

she has been pale and sad, and that she watches me with eyes full of entreaty and reproach? No, I will not do her this wrong. Poor Désirée!" Although Madame Chèbe admired her daughter's kind and generous heart, she thought the sacrifice too great for her to make.

"Take care, my child! we are poor, and a man like Frantz does not present himself every day."

"So much the worse, then, for me! At all events I will not marry him," cried Sidonie, and repeated her words without wavering to Frantz himself. He grew angry, as she would give no reasons, either to him or to his brother, though her mother whispered mysteriously to the elder brother that she was proud of her daughter, and added, under a promise of secrecy, that it was on Désirée's account.

"Do not utter a word of reproach, my boy," said Risler to Frantz; "she is an angel."

"Yes, an angel!" sighed Madame Chèbe, in such a way that the poor fellow decided to leave Paris, and he immediately sought and obtained a position at Ismailia, on the works at the isthmus of Suez. He departed, knowing nothing of Désirée's affection, and yet, when he went to bid her farewell, her love was plainly to be read in her clear blue eyes. Fortunately, some suffering souls are endowed with infinite patience. Her friend gone, the lame girl, with the courage and hope inherited from her father, toiled on industriously, saying to herself with a gentle smile, "I will wait!" and from that

moment her birds' wings were widely spread, as if they were about to take flight to Egypt themselves.

From Marseilles Frantz wrote to Sidonie a last letter—a letter at once comical and touching; a singular combination of reproaches and tenderness, mixed with the most commonplace details of the vessel in which he was to sail.

Sidonie, however, cared little for this; she neither laughed nor cried at this letter, for many other things filled her head. She had become very anxious over George's silence. Since she had left Savigny, she had not received one line from him; her own letters elicited no response. It was true that she had learned from Risler that George was occupied day and night, for his uncle's death had thrown more responsibility upon him than he was prepared for; but not to write one word—!

From the window in the corridor, where she had again resumed her silent watches (for she had relinquished her position at Mademoiselle La Mire's), Sidonie caught many a glimpse of her lover; she saw him going in and out of the manufactory, and in the evening watched him enter his carriage to be driven to the train that was to take him to Savigny, where his aunt and cousin were passing the first months of their mourning.

All this terrified her; and, above all, the proximity of the factory rendered her more sensible of the real distance between herself and her lover. She could almost make him hear the sound of her

voice ; only a few stone-walls divided them ; and yet, how far off he was !

One snowy night that winter Risler entered Madame Chèbe's apartment. "News!" he said, "great news!" George Fromont had just informed him that, in obedience to his uncle's last wishes, he was about to marry his cousin Claire, and that, as it was impossible for him to carry on the business alone, he had resolved to take him into partnership, giving to the new firm the name "Fromont & Risler."

Sidonie never knew whence came the strength that enabled her to keep her secret, when she learned that the manufactory had eluded her grasp, and that another woman was about to take her place. What a miserable evening ! Madame Chèbe sat at the table before a huge basket of household linen, while her husband was in front of the fire. The lamp burned badly ; the room was cold, and an odor of cooking hung about it ; but Risler was gay, intoxicated, in fact, with joy.

For many a long day Sidonie lay ill, dangerously ill. As the sick girl lay in her bed and heard her windows rattle behind her curtains, she fancied that the carriages rolling past were bearing Claire and George to their wedding. This fancy brought on paroxysms of nervous weeping, which puzzled her nurses and physicians.

Finally, her youth and good constitution triumphed, and, thanks to the tender care of her mother and Désirée, who by this time had learned

the sacrifice that had been made for her, Sidonie rose from her sick-bed ; but the girl was out of spirits and weary of her life. Sometimes she talked of traveling, of leaving Paris ; at other times she decided to enter a convent. All her friends watched her tenderly, more anxious about her now than they had been when her ailment had been merely physical. Suddenly she acknowledged her secret to her mother. She loved the elder Risler ; she had never dared to say so, but it was he whom she had always loved, and not his brother. Everybody was wonderstruck at this, Risler more than any one else ; but the young girl was so pale and so pretty, she looked at him with such tender eyes, that it was not long before the good fellow worshiped the very ground on which she stood. Perhaps, too, this affection had only lain dormant in the dim recesses of his heart.

And now, dear reader, you understand why, on the evening of her marriage-day, Madame Risler, in her glistening white raiment, looked forth with a smile of triumph at the window where for the last ten years she had passed so many sad and lonely hours. That haughty, contemptuous smile was evidently bestowed on the poor child whom she fancied she saw opposite through the darkness of the night and of the past.

“ What are you saying, little Chèbe ? ” murmured Sidonie. “ You see I am here, after all.”

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

“MY WIFE’S RECEPTION-DAY.”

THE manufactory-bell has just rung ; it is noon, and mothers hurry home to their babies, having an hour of leisure, while Risler and his young partner, George Fromont, stroll leisurely through the garden toward the pretty home they occupy under the same roof. They are talking earnestly on their business-affairs.

“ You must look out,” said Fromont, “ or we shall find the Prochassons dangerous rivals.”

Risler had no fears ; he knew his own strength, and had had vast experience. “ Then, too,” he added—“ but this is confidential—I am on the track of a new invention that will be a fortune in itself.” By this time they had crossed the carefully-kept garden, with its acacias almost as old as the house itself, and its superb ivies that veiled the heavy walls.

By Fromont’s side Risler looked like a clerk rendering an account of the day’s transactions. He stopped every few steps to finish a sentence, for his

words came slowly. He had no idea that a pretty face was looking at him through the curtains of a window in the upper story.

Madame Risler was waiting for her husband to come to lunch, and was very impatient at his delay. She beckoned to him, but Risler did not see her. He was occupied with the Fromont baby, who was taking the air in the arms of her nurse, a mass of lace and ribbons. How pretty the little creature was! "Your very image, Madame George!"

"Do you think so? And yet almost every one thinks her more like her father!"

"She resembles him, of course; but—" and all of them—father, mother, Risler, and the nurse—gravely examine the atom of humanity, who looks at them, in turn, with wide-open, wondering eyes. Sidonie bends from her open window, to see what they are all doing, and why her husband does not come up.

Risler had just taken the infant into his own arms, and stood, enveloped in the floating robes and blue ribbons, trying to win a smile or a coo of delight from the child. He looked like its grandfather. "How old the poor man is growing!" thought Sidonie; "and how absurd he looks playing with that baby!" At last, tired of waiting, she sent her maid to say that lunch was waiting. Risler consigned the infant to its nurse with evident regret, and ran up the staircase, laughing like a schoolboy. He laughs still as he enters the dining-room, but one look at his wife checks his merriment. She

was seated at the table, a chafing-dish in front of her; he knew that she was thoroughly out of temper by her martyr-like air.

"You decided to come, then. It is very fortunate!" Risler seated himself somewhat abashed.

"I could not help it, my dear; that child is so—"

"How often am I to beg you not to call me 'my dear'?"

"But if we are alone?"

"You can never understand anything," answered his wife, impatiently; "and the result is that no one respects me here. Even the gardener, Achille, hardly lifts his hat when I pass him. To be sure, I am not a Fromont, and I have no carriage!"

"But, my dear—I beg your pardon—I mean—you can always use Madame George's *coupé*. She has told you that it is always at your disposal."

"And how often am I to tell you that I will not place myself under any obligations to that woman?"

"O Sidonie!"

"Yes, I understand. I must not breathe a word against this doll. I must allow her to tread me under her feet!"

"My child!" and poor Risler tries to soothe his wife, and to say a few words in favor of his dear Madame George. His success was not enviable; for suddenly Sidonie burst out in a torrent of indignant words

"I tell you, in spite of her tranquil air and saint-like expression, that woman is haughty and malicious. She detests me, and I know it. When I was

little Sidonie, to whom she could toss her broken playthings and cast-off clothing, I was all very well. But now that I have a good position, and need no assistance from her, too, she wishes to humiliate me at every turn. She presumes to volunteer her advice, and to criticise my every act. She was kind enough, too, to express her astonishment at my engaging a maid—naturally—for had I not always been accustomed to waiting on myself? She seeks every opportunity to hurt and wound me. When I present myself on her reception-day, you should hear the condescending tone in which she asks for dear Madame Chèbe! Ah, well! Yes, I am a Chèbe, and she a Fromont. My grandfather was a druggist, and hers a money-lender and a peasant! I shall tell her so some fine day, and shall also take occasion to mention that the little girl of whom she is so proud is the living image of old Gardinois, and Heaven knows that he is no beauty!"

"My child!" gasped Risler, who could find no words to answer such a tirade.

"Yes, admire that baby if you choose! It is always ill, and cries half the night, and keeps me awake. In the morning the mother's piano begins."

Risler adopted the wisest course—he said not one syllable in reply. But after a while, when he saw that his wife was calmer, and looking a little ashamed of her outbreak, he began to say a few complimentary words to her.

"That is a very pretty costume. Are you going to pay visits to-day?"

"No, I am not going out," answered Sidonie. "On the contrary, I receive. This is my day."

Seeing her husband's look of utter astonishment, she continued: "Yes, it is my day. Why should I not have a day as well as Madame Fromont?"

"Without doubt—certainly," muttered poor Risler, looking about him anxiously. "That is the reason, then, that there are so many flowers in the rooms?"

"Yes. This morning, when I sent Justine into the garden—I am wrong again, then, am I? You do not say so, but I can see that you think I had no right to send Justine for flowers. I thought the garden belonged to us as well as to the Fromonts?"

"It does, certainly; but it would have been better—"

"To ask for them—I suppose—of course. Pile on the humiliations, I beg of you! A few miserable chrysanthemums, and some green branches, are worth asking for, are they not? At all events, I took them openly, and when she comes up by-and-by I will show them to her."

"She is coming, then? How good of her!"

Sidonie started up in a rage.

"Good of her! And why, pray? Do I not go every Wednesday to her rooms, where I am bored to death by her attitudes and affectations?"

Madame Risler omitted to state that these same Wednesdays had been of immense service to her—that they were like a weekly *journal des modes*, where she had been taught how to enter and leave a room—how to receive and dismiss a guest—where

to place her flowers. Nor did Sidonie say that Claire's friends, of whom she had spoken so disdainfully, were the persons whom she had begged to come to her on her day.

But would they come? That remained to be proved. And would young Madame Fromont herself fail to make her appearance? Sidonie grew more and more disturbed and anxious as the day went on. "Hurry!" she cried, impatiently; "how long you are to-day over the lunch-table!"

One of Risler's habits was to eat slowly, and smoke his pipe at table over his coffee. But to-day he was robbed of these dear delights. His pipe must not be taken from its case, on account of its villainous odor, and his last mouthful was swallowed in a violent hurry, as he must change his dress, so that he might present himself to the ladies, in his wife's *salon*, later in the day.

What a sensation in the factory, when Risler was seen to enter on a week-day in a black coat and white tie!

"Are you going to a wedding?" cried the cashier, Sigismond. And Risler answered, not without pride:

"Not at all. It is my wife's day!"

Soon every one knew that it was Sidonie's reception-day; and Achille, the gardener, was thoroughly out of temper because the laurel at the gate had been robbed of its best branches.

Seated at his drawing-board, under the high window, Risler had thrown aside his coat and turned up his fresh cuffs. But the consciousness that his

wife expects company disturbs him, and occasionally he puts on his coat and mounts the private stairs to ascertain how things are going.

"No one here yet?" he asks, timidly.

"No one, sir."

In the red drawing-room—for they have a *salon* furnished in red damask—Sidonie is installed on a low couch—several arm-chairs in front of her, a small table at her side, on which lie a book or two, a work-basket, and a bunch of violets. All is arranged exactly as at the Fromonts', on the story below. But the indefinable good taste which characterizes all Claire's belongings is lacking in Sidonie's rooms. The mistress of the house is too elaborately dressed; her costume is too new—she has rather the air of paying a visit than of receiving one. But, in Risler's eyes, everything is superb. He began to say so as he entered the room, but his wife's frown intimidated him.

"You see," she said, pointing to the clock, angrily, "it is four o'clock—no one will come now. But Claire's impertinence is unpardonable; she is at home, for I heard her come in!"

In fact, ever since noon Sidonie had heard every sound in the house—the child's cry, and the lullaby of the nurse. Not a door had opened or shut without Madame Risler's perceiving it. Risler wished to retreat, and thus avoid hearing the old complaints, but his wife objected.

"You, at least," she said, "might remain, since all the rest of the world shuns me!" So the poor

fellow, miserable and nervous, stood glued at a window, feeling very much like a person who dares not move during a thunder-shower lest he should attract the lightning to his own defenseless head.

Sidonie moves about restlessly, shifts a chair, and finally pulls the bell violently. "Ask Achille if no one has come for me to-day." As the servant turned to obey her, Madame Risler continued to her husband, "Achille is so stupid, and so hateful, that he has probably told people that I am out."

But no, Achille had seen no one.

Silence and consternation fall on the inmates of the pretty, flower-scented room. Sidonie follows her husband's example and takes up a position in another window. Both look down on the garden, dimly seen through the gathering twilight. Sigismond's lamp is already lighted, and his long shadow wavers on the ceiling of the counting-room.

Suddenly a *coupé* drives up to the door—from it emerges a mass of lace and velvet, jet and furs—and Sidonie recognizes one of Claire's most fashionable friends. A visitor at last! So the little household falls into position. The gentleman leans idly on the mantel, and the lady in her low chair carelessly turns over the leaves of a new book.

The attitudes were thrown away; the visit was not for Sidonie—the lady's call was for the floor below!

Ah! if Madame George could but have heard the denunciations of herself and her friend!

At this moment, the door was thrown open, and Mademoiselle Planus was announced. This lady was the cashier's maiden sister—a sweet and gentle old lady, who came as a matter of duty to pay a visit to the wife of her brother's employer, and who was overwhelmed with amazement at the warmth of the welcome she received. Sidonie was very gracious, happy to show herself in all her glory to a former acquaintance. She talked and laughed gayly, that Madame George might know that she had visitors; and, when the lady went away, Sidonie accompanied her to the head of the stairs, with a great rustling of flounces and a sharp click of high-heeled boots, and called out loudly that she was always at home on Fridays.

Now it is night. In the next room the table is being laid for dinner. Madame Fromont will not come, and Sidonie is white with indignation. "We are too insignificant for your idol to visit," she said, "but I will revenge myself in some way!" And, as she raised her voice angrily, her intonation lost its refinement, and betrayed Mademoiselle La Mire's apprentice.

Risler murmured: "Who can tell what the reason is? The child may be ill."

She turned fiercely upon him.

"It is your fault entirely," she cried; "you have taught your friends to neglect and insult me." And the door of her sleeping-room was shut with such

violence that the crystal globes rattled, and all the trifles on the *étagère* danced about. Poor Risler, left alone in the middle of the *salon*, contemplated his varnished boots and black coat with disgust, and murmured, mechanically:

“ My wife’s day ! ”

CHAPTER II.

REAL PEARL, AND IMITATION PEARL.

“WHAT is the matter? What have I done to her?” asked Claire of herself, as she thought of Sidonie. She was absolutely ignorant of all that had passed between her friend and George at Savigny. With her straightforward nature, it was impossible for her to imagine the jealousy and low ambitions that had grown up at her side, and yet her former friend’s cold and disdainful air disturbed the calmness of her daily life.

To a polite reserve, singular enough from a person whom she had known so intimately, suddenly succeeded an air of angry contempt, before which Claire stood as helpless and silent as before a mathematical problem. Sometimes, too, a vague presentiment assailed her—a suggestion of possible unhappiness—for women are always more or less clear-sighted, and even those most innocent and unsuspecting have wonderful intuitions. Occasionally, Madame Fromont would wonder at Sidonie’s conduct, but her own life was so full of tender cares for husband, child, and mother, that she had little time to spare for Sidonie’s caprices. Had she been still

unmarried, this sudden destruction of an old friendship would have pained her intensely ; but now all was changed ; even Sidonie's marriage had not astonished her. Risler was too old, certainly ; but what did it matter, if his wife loved him ?

As to being vexed that "little Chèbe" had reached her present position, such an idea had never entered Claire's mind. Her nature was too generous for such baseness. She had, on the contrary, hoped sincerely that this young woman, who had lived under the same roof as herself, would be happy and contented in her new position. In the most affectionate manner she sought to advise her, and to instruct her in the ways of the world to which she was as yet a stranger.

Between two women, equally pretty and equally young, advice is easily exchanged. When Madame Fromont, on the day of a great dinner, took Madame Risler into her dressing-room, and said in a caressing tone, " Too many jewels, dear ; and then, you know, with a high-necked dress, one should never wear flowers in the hair," Sidonie colored, thanked her friend, but in her heart of hearts inscribed a new grief against her.

In Claire's circle Sidonie had been coolly received. The Faubourg St.-Germain has its pretensions, but, if you imagine that the mercantile community are without them, you are greatly mistaken.

These wives and daughters of rich merchants knew little Chèbe's story, and, had they not known it, they would have guessed it from her way of pre-

senting herself to their notice. She was too eager and too humble, and about her lingered something of the air of a shop-girl ; and her occasional disdainful attitudes recalled the young women in black silk, in a millinery establishment, who are absolutely imposing from the height of the puffs and curls on their heads, and who look with utter contempt on the ignorant persons who attempt to make a bargain.

Sidonie felt herself criticised and examined, and she prepared for battle. The names pronounced in her presence—the *fêtes*—and the books of which they talked—were equally unknown to her.

Claire did her best to place her at her ease.

Among these ladies, several thought Sidonie very pretty, too pretty to belong to their circle ; others, proud of their wealth, and of the success of their husbands, found it easy to be insolently condescending to the little *parvenu*. Sidonie, however, included them all in her sweeping phrase : " If they are Claire's friends, they are my enemies," she said, with infinite bitterness.

The two men suspected nothing of what was going on between their wives. Risler—absorbed in his new invention—sat half the night at his drawing-board. Fromont passed his days out of his house, breakfasted and often dined at his club, and was rarely seen at the factory. In fact, Sidonie's vicinity troubled him. The passionate caprice he had had for her, and which he had relinquished at his uncle's bidding, still haunted his memory ; and, feeling his own weakness, he sought safety in flight.

The night of Risler's marriage, when he himself was a bridegroom of but a few months, he had found that he could not meet Sidonie with impunity. From that moment he avoided her society, and never by any chance did her name pass his lips.

Unfortunately, as they lived in the same house, as the ladies exchanged a dozen visits each day, the prospect of meeting her was always before him. Thus it came to pass that the young husband, determined to do no wrong, felt compelled to leave his home, and seek a refuge elsewhere. Claire accepted this life as inevitable; her father had accustomed her to incessant though short "trips on business;" and during her husband's absence she invented for herself new pursuits and home duties.

Sidonie went out a good deal. Often, toward night, just as she was entering her garden-gate in a superb toilet, George's carriage would dash past her. Shopping, for the mere pleasure of spending money, was one of her favorite amusements, and so occupied her that she was often detained much later than she had intended. They exchanged a cool bow at the turn of the staircase, and George hurried into his own rooms, hiding his emotion under the caresses he lavished on the little girl who stretched forth her arms to greet him. Sidonie seemed to have totally forgotten the past; or, if she recalled it at times, it was with a natural contempt for a character so unlike her own. Her time, too, was entirely occupied. After some hesitation, she had decided to take lessons in singing, thinking that it was rather

late in life to begin the piano ; and, twice each week, Madame Dobson, a pretty, sentimental blonde, gave her a lesson, from twelve to one o'clock. This lesson heard through the open windows, and the constant practice of scales, gave to the house something of the air of a boarding-school ; but Sidonie had said to herself : " Claire plays the piano ; she passes for an elegant and distinguished woman ; I am determined that the world shall say as much for me." The poor child did not dream of study, or of real improvement in any way ; she passed her life in the shops, and with her milliner and dress-maker.

Of those imitation pearls which she had handled for so long a time, something still clung to her—a little of their brilliancy without depth, of their pale lustre, and of their fragility. She was herself an imitation pearl, fair and brilliant ; but Claire Fremont was a real jewel, a deep-sea pearl, and, when the two women were together, it was easy to distinguish the Parisian imitation from the natural growth.

Of all Claire's surroundings, the one which Sidonie most envied her was her infant—a dainty mass of ribbons and lace. She had no thought of sweet maternal duties—no knowledge of Claire's long hours of wakefulness—of anxious watches and tender hopes. She never longed for the touch of dimpled fingers, or dreamed of glad awakenings, merry shouts, and splashing water. No mother-instinct was aroused within her empty heart ; she simply regarded the child, with its flowing robes, in the

arms of its tall-capped nurse, as a charming accessory to her morning walks and spring toilets.

She had only her parents or her husband as companions, consequently she preferred to go out alone. Her husband mortified her by his awkward caresses, and a habit he had of tapping her like a child on her cheek, or of taking her by the chin. His very way of sitting and looking at her enraged her—it was so like an affectionate dog! Her parents she had managed to dispose of for the time being, by inducing her husband to rent for them a little house at Montrouge. This had put an end to M. Chèbe's frequent invasions, and to the interminable visits of her mother, who, cheered by her daughter's good fortune, was gradually falling into idle habits. Sidonie would have much liked to get rid of the Dolobelles; she was annoyed by their living so near her. But the old actor was not easily moved from a situation that he liked, having the theatres and the boulevards so close at hand. Then Désirée was attached to their rooms, and their dingy court—dark at four o'clock—was to her like the familiar face of a friend. Sidonie rarely saw her old neighbors, however, and her life would have been solitary enough if it had not been for the amusements that Claire procured for her. Each of these, however, was a new injury, and she said to herself, "Must I always be indebted to her?"

And when, at the dinner-table, they sent her tickets for the theatre, or an invitation for the evening, even while she hurried to dress, she thought

only of crushing her rival. These occasions, however, became more and more infrequent, for Claire was much occupied with her child. When her grandfather came to Paris, he never failed to bring them all together. He invited them to dine at some famous restaurant, expended a vast deal of money, and then took them to the theatre.

He talked familiarly to the waiters at the restaurant, laughed loudly at the theatre, and made their party as conspicuous as possible. On the occasion of these somewhat vulgar festivities, which George contrived sometimes to avoid, Claire dressed very quietly, and thus escaped observation ; Sidonie, on the contrary, made a gorgeous toilet, took a front-seat in the box, and enjoyed the coarse jests of the old peasant. She looked at herself in the mirrors, and, with an air of proprietorship, placed her opera-glass, handkerchief, and fan, on the red velvet in front of her. The commonplace glitter of these public places enchanted her, and she accepted them as the epitome of luxury ; she bloomed therein, like a pretty paper flower in a filigree garden.

One evening at the Palais Royal, when a great crowd assembled to witness a new play, among all the women present—painted celebrities, with powdered hair and enormous fans—Sidonie attracted the most attention. All the opera-glasses in the house, influenced by a certain magnetism, were one by one directed to her box. Claire was infinitely annoyed, and finally relinquished her chair to her husband and took refuge in the back of their box.

George, young and very distinguished in appearance, had, at Sidonie's side, the air of her husband, while Risler, older and graver, looked as if he belonged to Claire, who in her dark and quiet costume had the air of a woman who desired to escape observation.

Going out, each took the arm of her neighbor, and a little *grisette*, commenting loudly on Sidonie's appearance, used the words "her husband"—and the foolish little woman was in a glow of delight. "Her husband!" These simple words sufficed to awaken a crowd of wicked thoughts and plans, that for some time had slept quietly in the recesses of her nature. She looked at Risler and at Claire as they walked in front. Madame Fromont's quiet elegance seemed dowdiness to her distorted vision. She said to herself, "How vulgar I must look when I have my husband's arm!" and her heart beat more quickly as she thought of the distinguished-looking pair she and George Fromont would have made. And when she saw Claire and her husband enter the well-known blue *coupé*, she allowed herself to dwell on the idea that Claire had stolen her place, and that she had a right to take it again if she could.

CHAPTER III.

THE TAVERN OF THE RUE BLONDEL.

EVER since his marriage, Risler had given up going to the brewery. Sidonie would have no objection to an elegant club, but the idea of his spending an evening over his pipe with Dellobelle, and Sigismond his cashier, humiliated and annoyed her. Consequently he never went, and this was somewhat of a sacrifice for him. It was almost like a country inn, this quaint brewery in a remote corner of old Paris, for La Rue Blondel bore a slight resemblance to a street in Zürich or Basel. A Swiss kept the brewery, and when the door opened it was like a reminiscence of his boyhood to Risler. A long, low room, hams hanging from the ceiling, huge casks of beer ranged against the wall, and on the counter an enormous bowl of potato-salad and a gigantic basket of pretzels, made up the scene. For twenty years Risler had smoked his pipe there ; he had his own table and his own corner, where two or three of his compatriots joined him, and listened in solemn silence to the interminable but amicable disputes of Dellobelle and Chèbe. When Risler left the brewery, the others deserted it also. M. Chèbe, to be sure, had excellent reasons for doing

so, as he now resided at too great a distance; for, thanks to his children's generosity, he had at last realized the dream of his whole life.

“When I am rich,” he had always said, “I will have a little house of my own just out of Paris, and a garden that I shall take care of myself. It will be better for my health than Paris; the life here is too exciting.”

Ah, well! he had his house and his garden, but after all he was not amused by them. It was at Montrouge that he resided, in a square box of a cottage—glaringly white—with a grape-vine on one side. Next to him was another house precisely similar, which was occupied by the cashier, Sigismond Planus, and his sister. To Madame Chèbe these neighbors were invaluable. When the good woman was tired of herself, she took her knitting, and enlivened the quiet old maid with anecdotes of past splendors. Unfortunately, her husband did not appreciate these same resources.

At first all went well. It was midsummer, and M. Chèbe was very busy arranging the house. Each nail led to endless discussions. In the garden it was the same thing. He wanted the turf to be always green, and insisted on an orchard. “My dear,” said his wife, “you forget that time is necessary for that.” “True!” said the little man, and for lack of an orchard he planted a vegetable-garden. He dug and weeded morning after morning, and wiped his brow ostentatiously, so that his wife would say:

“Rest, my dear; you will certainly kill yourself!”

While the fine weather lasted, the worthy people admired the sunsets, and talked of the good, healthy air. But when the autumn rains came, how dismal they were! Madame Chèbe, a thorough Parisian, regretted her old home, and remembered with a pang her daily excursions to market.

She sat near the window, and contemplated the dreary prospect: the rain fell in straight lines, the vines drooped from the wall, and the dead leaves lay in damp, sticky masses on the little path. And a short way off was the omnibus-station, with the well-known names of Parisian streets painted on their varnished sides. Each time that one of these omnibuses started on its return she followed it with longing eyes, in the same way that a convict at Cayenne watches the vessel that sets sail for France—made the journey in her imagination—knew just where it would stop, and through which gay streets it would clumsily roll along.

Under these circumstances M. Chèbe became unendurable. He had no one to listen to his long stories, no new listener to the history of the accident, “like that of the Duc d’Orléans.” Consequently, the poor man reproached his wife.

“Your daughter has exiled us—your daughter is ashamed of us!” For, in his indignation, the angry man threw the whole responsibility of this unnatural, heartless daughter on his wife. The poor woman was happy only when she saw him

start off for Paris, to narrate his wrongs to Dello-belle.

This illustrious man had his own injuries, in his turn. He had meant to form an important part of the new *ménage*, to organize *fêtes*, and to occupy the post, in fact, of general adviser. Instead of that, Sidonie received him very coolly, and Risler gave him no more invitations to the brewery; nevertheless, the actor did not complain too openly, and when he met his old friend overwhelmed him with flattery, for he meant to make use of him.

Tired at last of expecting the intelligent manager, Dellobelle had conceived the extravagant idea of purchasing a theatre, and becoming a manager himself. He looked to Risler for the necessary funds. Just at this time he had found a small theatre that was to be sold, in consequence of the failure of the manager. Dellobelle spoke of it to Risler, at first indifferently.

“It would be an excellent speculation,” he said.

Risler listened quietly, saying, “It would be a good thing for you.”

Then to a direct appeal, to which he dared not say “No,” Risler took refuge behind “I will see—perhaps,” and finally uttered the unfortunate words “I must see the estimates.”

For eight days the old actor had figured industriously—had added up long columns, seated between two women who watched him admiringly. Throughout the house rang the enchanting words, “M. Dellobelle is going to buy a theatre!” His

friends on the boulevards, and at the *cafés*, talked only of his good luck. Dellobelle frankly stated that he had found some one who would furnish him with money, and he was soon surrounded by a circle of actors without engagements, who whispered in his ear, "Do not forget me, my boy!"

He promised everything that was asked of him, breakfasted and dined at the *café*, wrote his letters there, and received his friends; and already two needy authors had brought him plays for his "opening night." He said, "My theatre," and ordered his letters to be addressed to him, "M. Dellobelle, manager."

When he had composed his prospectus, and made his estimates, he went to meet Risler at the brewery, for his friend was too busy to receive him during office-hours.

Dellobelle reached the brewery first, installed himself at their old table, called for two glasses of beer, and waited. Risler did not come; the actor took out his papers and read them over.

"Yes, it was a splendid thing; success was certain." Suddenly the door opened, and M. Chèbe entered. He was as annoyed and surprised to see Dellobelle as Dellobelle was to see him. He had written to his son-in-law, that morning, that he wished to have a long and serious conversation with him, and would see him at the brewery.

The truth was, M. Chèbe had relinquished the lease of the little cottage at Montrouge, and had hired a shop and *entre-sol* in La Rue de Mail. Hav-

ing done all this, his courage forsook him, and he was very anxious to know how his daughter would look at the matter, particularly as the shop was more expensive than the cottage, and would besides require quite a sum of money to be expended in repairs before they could take possession. Knowing by long experience the good-nature of his son-in-law, M. Chèbe preferred to make the disclosure to him, and thus leave to Risler the responsibility of making to his wife the announcement of this domestic *coup-d'état*.

Instead of Risler, it was Dellobelle whom he saw. They examined each other, like two dogs at the same platter. Each understood who it was that the other expected.

“Is not my son-in-law here?” asked M. Chèbe, looking at the papers spread out on the table, and emphasizing the words “my son-in-law,” as if to indicate that Risler belonged to him, and to no one else.

“I am expecting him momentarily,” answered Dellobelle, coolly, as he gathered up his estimates. Then, with a theatrical, mysterious air, he added, “We have important business together.”

“So have we,” answered M. Chèbe, whose scanty hair began to bristle, like the quills of the fretful porcupine. He, in his turn, called for two glasses of beer, and drew up a chair to the table.

Risler did not appear, and the two men grew very impatient. Each hoped that the other would leave. At last their ill-temper could no longer be

restrained, and, naturally, it was their friend who was attacked. M. Dellobelle began first: "I believe the fellow is mocking me!"

"The fact is—" said M. Chèbe, and then the two put their heads together and whispered: "Risler was close, Risler was selfish, as well as a *parvenu*." They laughed at his accent and his manners. But Chèbe went still further: "My son-in-law had better be cautious. If he sends away his wife's father and mother, he must guard her more carefully himself. You understand?"

"Certainly," said Dellobelle, "certainly. I am told, too, that Sidonie is somewhat reckless. But what could one expect? A man of that age—Hush! here he comes."

Risler excused himself as well as possible, but was evidently not at ease. He could not leave home until late; his wife had guests. And, all the time that he was speaking, the poor fellow was wondering to which of the two men he ought to listen first.

Dellobelle was generous. "You wish to talk with each other, gentlemen. Do not let me disturb you;" and then he whispered to Risler, "I have the papers."

"The papers!" said the other, in amazement.

"Yes; the estimates, you know," answered the actor. Thereupon, with a great affectation of discretion, he turned his back.

The two others conversed at first in a low voice, but finally Chèbe's wrath could no longer be re-

strained. He did not mean to be buried alive, he said.

“But what can you do with a shop?” asked Risler, timidly.

“What can I do with a shop?” repeated Chèbe, as red as an Easter-egg. “You forget, sir, I think, that I am a merchant, and the son of a merchant. I have no capital, it is true, but whose fault is that? If the person who exiled me from Paris—”

Here Risler enjoined silence, and disjointed words only were now to be distinguished: “A most convenient shop—a magnificent enterprise,” etc.

At last, when M. Chèbe was exhausted by his own energy, his son-in-law turned toward Dellobelle with a sigh. Chèbe drew his chair closer, that he might join in the conference. Seeing this, the actor folded up his papers, and said in a dignified tone, “Another time, if you please.”

But M. Chèbe was not to be thus rebuffed; he said to himself, “My son-in-law is so weak that there is no telling how much that buffoon can get out of him.” So he remained to watch.

Dellobelle was furious, for it was impossible to postpone the purchase for more than a day or two, and Risler had just told him that on the following morning he should go to Savigny for a month.

“For a month!” exclaimed M. Chèbe, aghast.

“Oh! I shall come up to town every day. But M. Gardinois is determined to have Sidonie there.”

M. Chèbe shook his head. “Business is business,” said he; “a master should always be on hand

to stand in the breach. What if the factory should take fire some night?"

Finally the last omnibus bore away the troublesome father-in-law, and Dellobelle could speak freely.

"First the prospectus," he said, not wishing to begin with figures, and, placing his eye-glasses on his nose, he began in this way:

"When we consider calmly the decrepitude into which the theatres of France have fallen; when we recall the days when Molière—" There were a good many pages like this; Risler smoked and listened.

Unfortunately, just at this point, the waiters began to put out the lights. They must depart—they would read as they went along. The actor stopped at each street-lamp and deciphered his own figures—so much for this—so much for that—so much for the salary of the actors.

On this point he became eloquent. "You must remember that we shall not have to pay our star anything, for I, of course, will take all the first parts; this, therefore, is a clear saving, and just the same as putting the money in your own pocket."

Risler did not reply; his thoughts were evidently wandering. At last Dellobelle put the question squarely. "Will you, or will you not, lend the money?"

"Frankly, then," answered Risler, with a courage that came as he saw the black walls of his factory before him, "I will not."

Dellobelle was stupefied; he was so certain of the money that he could hardly believe his ears.

"No," continued Risler; "I say no because it is absolutely impossible for me to do what you ask. I will tell you why."

And the honest man explained that he was not rich; although a partner in so wealthy a house, he had but little money at his own disposal. George and he each month drew a certain sum, and at the end of the year divided their profits. His expenses were large—besides, how could he be sure that the theatre would succeed?

"It certainly would," answered the actor, grandiloquently, "for I should be there—"

To all poor Dellobelle's entreaties Risler would only answer: "Wait two or three years; at present I have no right to speculate; my name is not my own—it belongs to the firm. Would you see me a bankrupt?" he continued, passionately, and then, more calmly, added: "Come to me again a year from now, and I will aid you if I can. And now good-night. Here is Achille at the gate."

It was after two o'clock when the actor reached home; he found his wife and daughter at work and waiting for him—but they were not so calm as of yore; a brighter color glowed on Désirée's fair face, and Madame Dellobelle held her big scissors with trembling hands. The birds on the table were more brilliant than usual, as if Hope had touched them with her life-giving fingers.

Madame Dellobelle watched the clock. "Ah!" she said, "if your father only succeeds, how happy we shall be!"

"He will, I am sure—M. Risler is so kind-hearted; and then Sidonie loves us dearly, though since her marriage she has seemed to neglect us. We must take into consideration the great difference in our positions; but I shall never forget all she has done for me."

The mother was about to ask what she meant, and what Sidonie had done, but her thoughts again wandered to her husband.

"If your father should have a theatre he would play every night, as he did when you were little—you do not remember it, but at Alençon he had an immense success. Ah! how handsome and gay he was in those days! but misfortune has sadly changed him, and yet I feel that a little happiness and freedom from care would make him quite young again. At Alençon the manager had a carriage—just think of our having a carriage! it would be such a good thing for you, my dear! you could go out every day and drive into the country; you could see the water, and the trees—"

The little lame girl drew a long breath. At this moment the door below shut violently, and M. Dellobelles heavy step was heard on the staircase. The two women dared not look at each other.

The poor fellow had certainly received a cruel blow. The humiliation of a refusal, the ridicule of his associates, the debt that he had incurred at the *café*, all weighed on his soul as he slowly mounted the long flights of stairs. His heart was nearly broken, but the dramatic instinct was so strong in

his nature that he could not tell his tale of woe in a natural manner. He entered, looked about him at the table covered with work, at his little supper in the corner, at the two anxious faces. Then he took three steps forward, waited a full minute—and you know if at the theatre a minute of silence is not long—and then fell on a chair, clasping his hands over his heart.

“I am doomed to eternal perdition!” he hissed between his set teeth. And he gave the table a tremendous thump with his closed fist—so tremendous that the poor little birds and beetles flew away to the four corners of the room. His terrified wife ran to his side, while Désirée half rose from her chair in mute distress.

The actor threw back his head, permitted his arms to fall limp and lifeless at his side, while he began a dismal monologue, interrupted by sighs and sobs, by threats and imprecations against the selfish *parvenus* for whose benefit the true artist poured out his life-blood. Then he lightly sketched his whole life: the triumphs of his *début*, his success at Alençon, his marriage to the “sainted woman”—and he pointed a trembling finger at the poor creature who stood bathed in tears, nodding a weak assent to each one of her husband’s propositions. He recalled his arrival in Paris, dwelt on his misery and privations. Alas! he had not endured many, as one could see who turned from the picture he presented, of well-dressed comfort, to the two frail, worn beings at his side.

“Ah!” he continued, “for fifteen years I have fought and struggled; for fifteen years I have owed every mouthful I have swallowed to the exertions of these two angels!”

“Dear father!” cried Désirée, pleadingly.

“Yes, every mouthful! nor am I ashamed to confess it, since the sacrifices that they have made have been laid on the altar of my sacred art. But now all is over; I renounce my vocation!”

His wife uttered a little shriek. “What are you saying?” she cried.

“Leave me to my misery!” he answered, in sepulchral tones. “My strength is gone; I can endure this unequal contest no longer.”

Could you then have seen the two pale women implore him with tears and embraces to still cherish the hopes that had been his sole joy; could you have heard them entreat him to have courage and struggle yet a little longer, you would have wept with them.

At last he made the asked-for concession, and promised them not to despair, not to take any desperate steps; and fifteen minutes later our comedian was seated at the table eating his supper with an excellent appetite—an appetite improved possibly by his exertions, and by the sympathy of his little family. The only indications of the stormy hour he had passed were to be found in a certain lassitude, common to all great actors who have played a long and dramatic *rôle*. Désirée and her mother paid a heavier penalty, however, for they never closed their eyes until daybreak.

CHAPTER IV.

AT SAVIGNY.

It was most unfortunate that Sidonie and George ever found themselves together again at Savigny. The trees that had heard his vows and protestations two short years before still stood there, and, as their leaves rustled in the wind, seemed to laugh at his inconstancy. As to Claire, she had never been so happy ; her child walked on the turf which her own feet had trod at the same age. She looked about her in serene content, and thanked God in her heart that he had placed her in so fair a world, and poured so many blessings upon her. Sidonie was in a very different frame of mind : she declared that the child's noise fatigued her, and appealed to M. Gardinois to know if children were not always bores. He laughingly told her that he had never heard of but one who was not. Sidonie was caressed and flattered by the old man to her heart's content. The carriages, that had been shut up for so many months that the spiders had woven their webs over the silk cushions, were now brought out and placed at her disposal. She drove out two or three times each day. Every one in the house followed the gay

example : the gardener took better care of his flowers, because Madame Risler wished to wear them in her hair ; suppers and dinners were arranged, where Claire, of course, presided, but of which Sidonie was, in fact, the real life.

Occasionally Claire was compelled to excuse herself at the last moment, and allow Sidonie to go alone to the station to meet the gentlemen on their return from the city in the afternoon. "Excuse me," Claire would say ; "my child is not well, and needs me."

Then Sidonie, with the air of a *grande dame*, would seat herself in the superb carriage, and order the coachman to drive like the wind. She lay back, wrapped in her soft laces, with her eyes half closed, and was only aroused from her luxurious dreams by hearing the voices of some poorly-clad people out for a holiday. She looked at them with a shiver of disgust, for they recalled too vividly her miserable past, with its mortifications and miseries.

But the carriage reached the station, and Sidonie heard with ill-disguised pleasure the murmur that greeted her appearance. "It is young Madame Fromont," she heard in a whisper from more than one person. The mistake was hardly surprising to any one who saw the three drive away : the pretty, gay little woman looked certainly as if she were the wife of the elegant man at her side ; while Risler, opposite, sedate and calm, looked as if he belonged to a different world.

While the château was thus transformed by the

caprices of a young woman, old Gardinois looked on quietly. He was of an extremely inquisitive nature, believing that "knowledge is power." He spared no pains to get at a secret whenever and wherever he suspected one; he had always been more or less of a spy. The goings and doings of his servants interested him hugely; not a basket of vegetables came into his kitchen without a preliminary examination from himself. He took the greatest pleasure in finding fault, and in bringing up an offender to justice. All this gave him some occupation, and served him again in the evening, when he repeated all the morning occurrences to his guests.

In order to carry out his plans of constant surveillance over his people, he spent the greater part of his days seated on a bench near the entrance to the grounds, where he could see every one who came in or out. At night he had invented another arrangement: he had an acoustic tube placed in the vestibule, and leading to his bedroom just above; in this way he thought he should hear every whisper uttered on the balcony and on the wide stone steps.

Unhappily, this arrangement, perfect as it was, exaggerated the sounds—confused and prolonged them; and sometimes, when M. Gardinois put his ear to the tube, he could hear nothing but a shrill scream from the parrot on his perch, or the loud ticking of the clock, and the voices reached him only in a confused buzz. So he abandoned this invention,

and it lay nearly forgotten, concealed in the window-curtains.

One night the old man was aroused, just as he was falling into his first sleep, by the creak of a door. This was very odd, for the whole house had retired. The old man had a happy thought. When could his tube be used to better advantage? He placed his ear to its mouth. He was right; first one door was gently opened and shut; then the chain on the larger hall-door slightly rattled. "But why do not the dogs bark?" Gardinois muttered to himself. "I thought so!"—and, drawing his curtains slightly aside, he looked out.

A tall, masculine form stood below, with his arm thrown around a slender figure, all wrapped in shawls and laces. It was a glorious summer night; soft, fleecy clouds floated over the full moon; the blue depths of the lake slept undisturbed by a single ripple; and here and there in the deep shadows glittered the greenish splendor of a fire-fly.

With cautious steps the pair stole down the avenue, and were quickly hidden by intervening trees from the inquisitive eyes above.

"I thought so!" repeated old Gardinois, who knew them—as well he might, for he had had his suspicions for some little time; and now, full of triumph, the old man returned to his couch.

The temptation of Sidonie's constant presence had been too much for George's weak nature. He adored her now with a mad and reckless passion. For her sake he deceived his wife—his best friend.

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He deceived Risler, his partner, his faithful adviser, and constant companion. Sidonie became his ever-present thought, and he realized that he had never loved until then. As to her, her love like herself was full of vain triumphs. Ah ! if she could but have said to Claire, "He loves me—me alone !" her happiness would have been far greater. As to Risler, she said to herself with a shrug of her shoulders, and in her shop-girl jargon, "What could he expect, an old fellow like that, whom I only married for his money ?"

CHAPTER V.

SIGISMOND PLANUS'S FEARS FOR HIS CASH-ACCOUNT.

“A CARRIAGE! and what should I do with a carriage?” said Risler, in a tone of profound amazement.

“I assure you,” answered George, uneasily, “that one is absolutely indispensable. The *coupé* is not sufficient. Our business relations are daily extending; and, besides, it is really not the thing to see one of the firm always going about on foot, and the other in his carriage. It does not look well, I assure you. It is a necessary expense, and I shall so consider it, and enter it among the expenditures of the firm; so you may as well make up your mind to it.”

It seemed to Risler as if this new expense was a robbery of some one; but, as George was so urgent, he felt himself compelled to yield; thinking, besides, “How happy Sidonie will be!”

The poor man did not know that a month before Sidonie had herself chosen a *coupé* which George could not present to her openly, and had consequently invented this ingenious method of advising its purchase.

Risler was easily deceived. Frank and honest

himself, he never suspected duplicity in others. At this time his attention was totally absorbed by his new invention, with which he hoped to revolutionize the manufacture of wall-papers. Thoughtful and anxious, he entered his home for dinner, and was too thankful to be received with smiles. He did not ask himself the reason of this change, nor yet why Sidonie never nowadays made any objection to his spending an occasional evening at the brewery. Their home, too, grew daily prettier, and comfort had given place to luxury. The simple *jardinières* had departed, and Sidonie now cared only for the latest caprices of the day—old carvings and rare china. Her boudoir was hung with a delicate shade of blue, the silk quilted in diamonds like the lining of a jewel-casket. A grand piano stood in the drawing-room instead of the old one, and the singing-lesson was a daily affair.

Madame Dobson, the teacher, was an American, whose lemon-colored hair was parted over a high forehead. Her husband prevented her from going on the stage, but she gave lessons and sang at private concerts. In spite of her steel-blue eyes and sharp features, she had a languishing, sentimental air that was positively exasperating. Uttered by her lips, the words love and passion seemed to have twenty syllables, and to be indefinitely prolonged; and Madame Dobson would raise her eyes to the ceiling with the expression of a dying swan. To this point Sidonie never arrived, though she made conscientious efforts in that direction. Her full ripe lips

and mischievous eyes were never made for such sentimentalities. Offenbach or Hervé, whose music she could have aided by a gesture, a nod of the head, or an arm akimbo, would have suited her much better, but she dared not make such an ignominious avowal. Sidonie, without intimate friends or relations, had by degrees made a friend of her music-mistress. She kept her to luncheon, took her to drive with her in the new *coupé*, and asked her aid in her shopping-excursions. The sentimental and sympathizing tone of Madame Dobson won her confidence. Sidonie spoke to her of George, of their love, and excused herself for her infidelity to her husband by complaining of the cruelty of her parents, who had compelled her to marry him, though he was so much older than herself. Madame Dobson was willing to aid her, not so much from lack of principle as from a desire for excitement and a romance. In her opinion, all husbands were tyrants; for she herself, poor little woman! was married to a dentist, who amused himself by beating her whenever he was out of temper with the world or himself. Two or three times each week she brought Sidonie tickets for the theatre or for the opera. Risler supposed they were presented to the music-teacher; little did he know that George had requested her to purchase them, and that the tickets were not for seats, but represented the best private boxes in the house.

To deceive a man like Risler required but little ingenuity. His credulity was boundless. Besides,

he knew nothing of the world in which his wife was already only too well known. He never went with her. Occasionally, in the early days of their married life, he had taken her to witness a new play, but had himself slept peacefully throughout the evening. Not enjoying the theatre, he was only glad to relinquish his seat to Madame Dobson.

Evening after evening, when his wife left him, he would frankly express his admiration at her superb toilets, not having the least idea of their expense or the source whence they came, and then, with a heart free from jealousy or doubt, spend the evening in solitude over his drawings.

Below, in the Fromont apartments, the same farce was enacted—but the *rôles* were reversed. There it was the wife who was deserted. Each evening, a half-hour before Sidonie's departure, M. Fromont's *coupé* came to the door to take George to the club. Claire was told that many an important business-affair had been brought to a prosperous conclusion over a game of billiards. And she, poor child! believed that only the interests of the firm could take him away from his home so constantly. Her spirits flagged for a time after he went out, for each night she hoped to retain him, or that he would propose that she should go to some place of amusement with him. But the loving arms of her child soon took the slight ache from her heart.

George and Sidonie met at the theatre. Their first heart-throb was one of vanity, for they attracted much attention. She was very pretty, and each new

caprice of fashion seemed to have been invented to lend a fresh charm to her coquettish face. Before long Madame Dobson was left the sole occupant of the box at the theatre, and Sidonie with George sallied forth in search of adventures. With unparalleled audacity they visited ballrooms and restaurants most frequented by the *demi-monde*, in regard to which class Sidonie felt a morbid curiosity.

From these excursions, Sidonie, who seemed actuated by a determination to make amends for the enforced monotony of her girlhood by a series of extravagances and excitements, returned to her *bourgeois* home with odd phrases and gestures, and new ideas for her toilet, which seemed strangely out of place in that quiet spot.

Doubts and suspicions were beginning to be excited in regard to her within the manufactory-walls. Women, even the poorest and most menial of their sex, have an instinctive perception of the cost of a feminine costume. When Madame Risler went out every afternoon about three, fifty pair of curious eyes scanned her enviously from the huge windows of the factory. These sharp eyes penetrated her velvet coat and her cuirass of jet, and detected the guilty conscience they covered. The operatives laughed contemptuously as they looked. "She does not put on those fine clothes to go to church!" "And," said another, "it is not more than three years since she used to go out with a water-proof cloak, and two cents' worth of chestnuts in her pocket, to keep her from starving!" And, in the

dust and turmoil of those hot rooms, more than one poor girl thought of the strange chance that had so transformed the life of this woman, and began to dream vaguely of possibilities for herself.

All this little world regarded Risler as grossly deceived by his wife. Some one professed to have seen madame at the theatre, accompanied by a gentleman, who carefully secluded himself from observation in the back of the box. Achille, too, had wonderful tales to tell, for the old gardener did not love Madame Risler. That Sidonie had admirers, or even several, all these people were quite prepared to believe; but, oddly enough, no one as yet had connected her name with that of George.

And yet Sidonie was anything but cautious in her relations with him. In fact, a certain ostentatious bravado characterized them. Many a time had she stopped him on the staircase, to make some arrangement for the evening, and had often sadly disturbed his nerves by whispering to him before the whole of them. The first shock over, George was amused, and looked upon these imprudences as a proof of the strength of her passion. In this notion, however, he deceived himself greatly.

The simple truth was, that Sidonie was determined to arouse Claire's jealousy and suspicions. All her efforts in this direction were useless: Claire saw nothing, suspected nothing; her own pure nature and innocent heart, like Risler's, remained undisturbed.

Sigismond, the cashier, was the only one whose

peace was troubled. But it was not of Sidonie that he thought, as he sat looking out on the little garden, with eyes that saw not. He thought of his master, and of the enormous sums he was spending.

"Have you a little money for me to-day, Planus? I was thoroughly cleaned out at cards last night." And Planus would open his safe with a groan as he thought of the day when the young man came to his uncle to confess some enormous gambling-debts. Suddenly the good man conceived a violent hatred for the club and all its members. One of them being in the office one day, Planus expressed this hatred in very strong terms:

"Confound your club! In the last two months M. George has wasted thousands there!"

The other laughed. "Thousands indeed!" he said; "why, we have not seen him there for certainly three months." The cashier said not another word, but a terrible fear had taken possession of his heart. If George did not go to the club, where did he pass his evenings, and how did he spend so much money? Evidently there was some woman connected with this mystery.

And, with this interpretation, Sigismond feared more than ever for his dear cash-box, for to this old Swiss all women were appalling, more particularly a Parisian. His first duty evidently was to warn Risler.

"M. George spends a good deal of money," said he, one day.

But Risler was not disquieted. "What do you

wish me to do about it, Sigismond ? He has surely the right to do as he pleases with his own ! ”

And the good fellow thought as he spoke. In his eyes young Fromont was the absolute master of the house, and he himself only a designer connected with it. The cashier said no more, until one day a bill came for a thousand-dollar cashmere shawl. He went to George. “ Am I to pay this, sir ? ” he asked. George Fromont was a little startled : Sidonie had forgotten to advise him of this new purchase.

“ Pay it—pay it, Planus,” he said, in some embarrassment ; “ you will pass it to my private account. It is a commission that I ~~executed~~ for a friend.”

That evening, just as Sigismond was lighting his lamp, he saw Risler passing through the garden, and called him. “ It is a woman,” he said, in a hoarse whisper, “ and I have the proof of it ; ” and the poor cashier felt that the manufactory was on the high-road to destruction—all for a woman.

Risler laughed, and refused to believe it. He knew this old mania of the cashier’s, who always attributed all misfortunes to the evil influence of the sex. Nevertheless the words of his friend returned to Risler in the evening, as he sat alone after Sidonie’s departure with Madame Dobson. The room looked strangely empty. Candles burned in front of the mirror, a forgotten bouquet lay on a chair, and a thousand expensive trifles were thrown carelessly about. Risler saw nothing of this, but, when he heard George’s *coupé* roll away, he felt a cold

chill at his heart as he thought of the solitary wife on the floor below. "Poor thing! if what Planus said is true—if George is faithless to her—oh, it would be terrible!"

Then, instead of going to work, he went downstairs to ask if Madame George was visible, for he thought it his duty to stay with her awhile.

The little girl had gone to bed, but a pair of small blue shoes lay on the hearth-rug, with some playthings. Claire was reading, while near her sat her mother, occupied in rubbing her watch, breathing on the crystal and wiping it. Risler was not the liveliest companion in the world, but Claire received him with the greatest cordiality. She knew all that was said of Sidonie, and, though she did not believe the half of it, she yet felt the most profound compassion for this man, whose wife left him so often in solitude. A mutual pity drew these two kind hearts together, and nothing could have been more touching than to see each consoling the other. Seated at this little table, Risler was very happy; the genial warmth of the fire, the sight of the furniture that for twenty years he had known so familiarly, the portrait of his old master, and his dear Madame George bending over her sewing, seeming younger and lovelier than ever, among these old surroundings—all seemed to render the doubts suggested by Planus alike improbable and fantastic. Occasionally she rose to go into the next room to look at her sleeping child. Without knowing precisely why, Risler found it more agreeable in these rooms than in his own; for some-

times his apartments seemed like a place where his wife came to make a fresh start for some new scene of gayety. There it was like an encampment, here like a home; a careful hand and watchful eye maintained order and elegance. The chairs were disposed at the right angles; the fire burned with a clear flame and pleasant noise; while the baby's half-worn shoe brought a choking sensation to his throat.

Thus, while Claire compassionated this kind, good soul, who merited a better wife, Risler, absorbed in admiration of her gentle ways and tender eyes that looked on him so kindly, asked himself if it were possible that George could be so foolish as to tire of such a charming companion.

CHAPTER VI.

STOCK-TAKING.

THE house at Montrouge occupied by the cashier Planus was next the one vacated by M. Chèbe. Planus lived there with his sister. He took the early omnibus to town every morning, and returned home to a late dinner. On Sundays he watered his flowers, tied up his vines, and fed his poultry. His sister kept the house, and sewed. Neither had married, and both entertained a like horror of the opposite sex, regarding each other as the only ones to be trusted, and as the great exception to the general rule.

In the eyes of these timid natures, Paris was inhabited by monsters, who were busy only with evil; and, when the tidings of some one of those miserable conjugal dramas penetrated to their seclusion, Mademoiselle Planus would say: "What can one expect? It is all the fault of the husband!" while Sigismond would groan, "Women—women!"

For some little time the discussions between the brother and sister had been singularly lively. Mademoiselle Planus pitied Claire, and wondered at her husband's neglect; while the cashier could

find no words to express his indignation at the unknown person who had drawn the price of a thousand-dollar cashmere from his iron safe. "What will become of us if this goes on?" he said, indignantly; for he had at heart the honor and well-being of the firm, where he had been for so many years.

One day Mademoiselle Planus sat knitting by the fire. She was becoming anxious, as her brother was an hour later than usual. The door opened, and he came and took a seat without speaking. This being contrary to his usual habit, his sister looked at him in terror.

"I know," he said, hoarsely, "who the woman is who means to ruin us!" and then, in a whisper, he uttered a name so unexpected that his sister begged him to repeat it two or three times over before she was quite sure that she understood it.

"It is impossible!" she cried.

"It is true!" said he, in a tone half of grief and half of triumph. Thereupon he related how old Achille had seen Sidonie and George, as they came out from a restaurant together, and the man never lied. Besides, other people knew other things. In fact, no one at the factory was in ignorance save Risler himself.

"But you must tell him," said his sister.

The cashier hesitated. "It is a most delicate affair. He would not believe me; and then, between the two partners, I should lose my situation! And Risler might have been so happy if he had

not married ! When he came to this country he had not a cent, and now he is at the head of one of the most substantial firms in Paris. What need had he of a wife ? And then nothing would do for him but a little Frenchwoman—any one of whom is enough to ruin a man—and now where are we ? Every day I must hand out money to M. George. I have warned Risler over and over again, all to no purpose. Risler shrugs his shoulders and says, ‘It is not my affair !’ He will sing another song, I fancy, now, however.” And the cashier relapsed into silence.

His sister was overwhelmed with consternation. “Had they only known this sooner, when Madame Chèbe was their neighbor—she was such a thoroughly honorable woman—and she could have spoken to Sidonie !”

“That is a good idea,” cried Sigismond. “Tomorrow you had better call on her. I thought of writing to Frantz ; he has always had much influence over his brother, and is really the only person who would ever dare to tell him certain things. But Frantz is so far off, and it would take him so long to get here ! Poor Risler ! I am sorry for him. No ; the best way is to warn Madame Chèbe, and you must do that.”

This commission was of so unpleasant a nature that his sister rebelled, but finally consented—first because she rarely resisted her brother, and secondly because she had a real desire to serve Risler.

Thanks to his son-in-law’s generosity, M. Chèbe

had been able to gratify his last fancy. For three months he had been installed in his empty shop, throwing the whole neighborhood into a state of wonder, as they saw the shutters taken down every morning, and as carefully put up at night as if the shelves had been covered with the rarest and most precious goods. A new counter and show-case, with a set of glittering scales, were all that was to be seen. In short, M. Chèbe had not yet made up his mind what branch of trade he should select!

He thought of it all day long, as he stood in his doorway with his pen behind his ear. The noise of the street, the hurry, and the bustle, enchanted the little man. He watched the unloading of the huge bales at the shop near by, and amused himself in wondering what their contents could be; and he went to bed at night exhausted with the superintendence of the labors of others, and said to his wife as he wiped his forehead, "Yes, this active life is just what I needed!"

Madame Chèbe smiled gently, but made no reply. Worn out with her husband's caprices, she quietly settled herself in the back-shop that looked out on a dark court, arranged her household gods as best she could about her, and consoled herself by thinking of her former prosperity, of her girlhood, and of her daughter, and, always well dressed and industrious, soon earned the respect and liking of the neighborhood. Her room was always exquisitely clean. During the day the bed had the look of a wide sofa, and a screen concealed the cooking-uten-

sils in the corner. The poor woman was thankful for a little peace and quiet, and hoped that her husband would long be as contented as at present.

M. Chèbe hung over his door the sign “Commission Merchant;” but he made no mention of any particular line of goods. His neighbors sold linens, silks, and laces; he was disposed to sell any or all of these. “To be sure,” he said to his wife, “I do not know much about linens; but, as regards silks, I am perfectly at home. But, to be successful, I ought to employ a traveling-agent. But I will sleep on it!”

After three or four months of this existence M. Chèbe began to find it slightly monotonous. The old pain in his head returned by degrees. The street was unhealthful; besides, there was no trade there. It was in the height of these complaints that Mademoiselle Planus made her visit. The simple old maid said to herself, as she turned the corner of the street, “I will break it to them by degrees.” But, like all timid natures, she disengaged herself of her burden as soon as she entered the doors. Madame Chèbe rose in her wrath—she had never heard anything to equal this. Her poor Sidonie to be the victim of frightful calumnies like these!

M. Chèbe took an equally high position. How dared any one come to him with such slanders? How could any one suppose that his daughter, the child of an honorable merchant, could be guilty of such conduct?

Mademoiselle Planus shook her head sadly, but

insisted on the truth of her words. They refused to listen, and regarded her as a gossip, a bringer of evil reports.

“But,” said the poor little woman, “every one knows it at the factory; and if you would represent to her—”

“What?” interrupted M. Chèbe, violently, furious at her persistence. “What shall I represent to Sidonie? She is married, and lives away from us. It is for her husband, who has both age and experience, to advise her and control her. Go to him, if you choose!”

And here the little man went off into long complaints of his son-in-law, the stupid Swiss, who spent his life in his office, and thought of nothing but making money, and who would never accompany his wife into the world, but preferred to her society that of his pipe, and his old associates at the brewery. And you should have seen the look of contempt with which M. Chèbe uttered the words “the brewery.” His wife had grown very silent, as incidents crowded on her memory of Sidonie’s reckless acts. What would not the poor woman have given to have been deaf, dumb, and blind? Like every one who has been sorely disappointed in life, she felt as if ignorance was the most desirable thing in the world.

Mademoiselle Planus rose to go. M. Chèbe lighted a burner in his empty shop, and his wife cried quietly in her dark back-room. When Sigismond reached home, his sister was there to receive

him, and told him of her visit, with tears in her eyes.

“They refused to believe me,” she said.

Her brother patted her kindly on the shoulder. “We did it for the best, my dear, and for the honor of our dear old master’s firm.”

From this time forth Sigismund was sad and silent. His cash-box was kept very low by constant applications for money from young Fromont. “My confidence is shaken,” he said to himself, in a low voice. And in the middle of the day, when he saw Sidonie, in gorgeous raiment, coming down the wide stone steps of the house, he grew hot with indignation as he looked at her. Was it for such a mass of frippery as that, that the honor of a great mercantile house was imperiled?

Madame Risler never suspected that in that old cashier, behind the wire grating, was her bitterest enemy, who watched her every act, knew the hour that her singing-mistress arrived, and how many times in the week her milliner and dress-maker, both laden with boxes, appeared. Sigismund counted the packages that came from the stores, and peered curiously in at all the windows of the Risler apartments. The rich coverings of the furniture, the baskets of rare flowers, the tall china vases, did not escape his observation. But he studied Risler’s face more than anything else. Could it be possible that this man accepted his dishonor quietly—that he knew it? To be sure, there was something absolutely monstrous in such a supposition in regard to

his friend—the best, the most generous, the most sincere of men! But it is a singular fact that unsuspicuous natures, once aroused to a certainty of evil, go afterward always too far. Once convinced of the treason of George and Sidonie, it was easy for the cashier to accept Risler's. Besides, how could one understand otherwise his singular indifference to the increased and enormous expenditures of the firm?

Sigismond had little comprehension of Risler's nature. Although the latter was a thorough business-man, he had much of the temperament of the artist, the inventor. Sigismond could not understand that a man on the point of a wonderful discovery, that would revolutionize their business, lived entirely within himself, and had neither eyes nor ears for anything else. Such people are like somnambulists—though their eyes are wide open, they see nothing.

But in Sigismond's opinion Risler saw all. This false idea rendered the old man extremely unhappy. He watched his friend's face whenever they were together, and gave his own solution to each fleeting expression; finally, discouraged by the absorption he saw there, he turned away in disgust, busied himself with his papers and accounts, and hardly deigned to answer a question.

No more pleasant little chats over the books; no more friendly smiles. Risler vaguely felt the change, and finally spoke of it to his wife. For some time she had perceived the growing dislike of those about

her. Sometimes, in passing through the court, she felt annoyed at the cold, menacing glances cast upon her by the cashier at his little window. The present disagreement between the old friends alarmed her. She took her measures at once.

"Do you not see," she said to her husband, "that he is horribly jealous of you—of your position? Formerly you were equals; now you are his superior, and he is beginning to dislike you. As to myself, I am accustomed to that sort of thing."

Risler opened his eyes in astonishment. "You?" he said.

"Yes, certainly. All these people detest me, for they do not fancy seeing 'little Chèbe' elevated to the position of your wife. Heaven knows what hideous things they say about me—your cashier's tongue is, I fancy, quite as long as the others. He is a very bad man."

These words had their effect. Risler was indignant, and, too proud to complain, returned coldness for coldness. These two good men, distrusting each other, and finding themselves uncomfortable in each other's presence, ended by rarely meeting.

Sidonie's time was fully occupied in managing all the details of her luxurious life. She must have a country-house. To be sure, she utterly abhorred trees and fields. "There is nothing more dreary in the world," she said.

But Claire passed the summer at Savigny. With the first warm weather her trunks were packed; curtains and carpets were shaken and put up in

camphor; and the baby's cradle, with its blue ribbons, figured on the top of a great furniture-wagon that might have been seen slowly creeping along the highway in the direction of Savigny.

The family followed a few hours later, and then Sidonie considered Paris deserted; and, although she loved it even in July and August, when it was like a fiery furnace, she was nevertheless annoyed and envious when she thought that all the world of fashion were wandering by the sad sea-waves, under huge white umbrellas.

“Sea-bathing?” But Risler could not leave town.

“Then a house in the country?”

“But I have not the means,” said Sidonie to herself.

George would have gladly come to the rescue, and at once gratified this new caprice. But a country-house is not so easily concealed as a diamond bracelet or an India shawl. Still, Risler was of so simple a nature that they might try the experiment with him possibly.

So, to prepare the way, his wife spoke to him over and over again of her longing for a little place in the country, not too far away from Paris. Risler listened with a pleased smile. He thought of the green grass, of an orchard with trees loaded with fruit; but, as he was prudent, he said: “We will see, we will see! Wait until the end of the year.”

The end of the year means so much to men of business! Then the books are all balanced, the accounts all made out; and even the errand-boys in

the establishment are interested, for on the happy results of those long columns of figures depends, perhaps, their own gift.

Sigismond Planus is, for the time being, master of the situation, and the house of Fromont & Risler hangs on his words. The old cashier has a fearful air of importance, ensconced behind his iron grating. There he sits, day after day, turning over the heavy folios.

Young Fromont would come in on tiptoe, with his cigar in his mouth. "Well, how are you getting on?"

The sole response from Sigismond would be a groan.

This, George knew only too well, indicated that things were not looking very promising. In fact, since the days of the French Revolution, when the paving-stones of the court were torn up for a barricade, no such unsatisfactory accounts had been seen. The general expenses had absorbed all the profits and more, for young Fromont found that he had overdrawn his account. He received this statement from the cashier pleasantly enough. "Things will be better the coming year," he said; and, to restore the cashier to good-humor, George handed him a much larger sum than usual as a New-Year's gift, and bade him say nothing to Risler. "I will tell him myself," added George.

When he entered the little office, lighted from above like a studio, and saw his partner bending over his drawing, George had a moment of shame and hesitation.

"Is that you?" cried Risler, gayly. "My invention is nearly perfected, and it will not be long before, with its aid, we shall distance all competitors."

"That is all very well for the future," answered Fromont, "but of the present you do not seem to think."

"True—true," said Risler; "and these accounts, how are they? Not very satisfactory, I imagine."

He said this because he discovered in George's face an expression of annoyance.

"Extremely so," answered the young man, "for the first year: we have each of us made a handsome sum; and, as I thought you might want some money to-day to purchase some gift for your wife—" and, without looking at the honest man, upon whom he was thus imposing, George laid upon the table a pile of bank-notes and of gold.

Risler was for a brief moment quite delighted. All that money for him—for him alone? He thought first of the liberality of these Fromonts, who had done so much for him, and then of his little Sidonie, whose often-expressed wish he could now venture to gratify. Tears rose to his eyes; a sweet and tender smile hovered on his lips; he extended both hands to his partner.

"I am happy—very happy!" he murmured.—This was his phrase on all great occasions.—Then, rustling the crisp notes before him, he said: "Do you know what these are? A country-house for Sidonie." And the good man smiled with an air of triumph.

CHAPTER VII.

A LETTER.

“To M. FRANTZ RISLER, *Engineer of La Compagnie Française, Ismaïlia, Egypt.*

“Frantz, my boy, it is old Sigismond who writes to you, to tell you, very abruptly, that strange things are going on in your brother’s house. His wife deceives him grossly, and the end will be that the world will regard him as a rascal. You must come at once; no one but yourself can make your brother do what he ought to do without delay. His friends here he will not believe. You have no time to lose, and must come home immediately. I know that you are earning your daily bread, that you have your future to create; but I know, too, that the honor of the name bequeathed to you by your parents is of more importance in your eyes than anything else. I tell you, therefore, in solemn earnest, that, if you are not here soon, your name of Risler will be shamed and disgraced!

“SIGISMOND PLANUS.”

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

THE AVENGER.

THOSE persons whose lives are sedentary, either from infirmities or from the nature of their daily labors, become interested in the opposite windows and in the passers-by, to a degree that is not easily understood by those whose existences are of a totally different character.

Madame Dellobelle and her daughter lived a very secluded life, and had, therefore, learned to feel a keen interest in the outside world that flowed on through their little street with a certain regularity. As the window was small, the mother, whose eyes were growing dim from advancing years and constant labor, sat nearest it, close behind the muslin curtains; her daughter's arm-chair was a little farther off, and the mother announced each passer-by: this gave food for much discussion, and shortened the long hours. There were two young sisters; a gentleman in a gray coat; a child attended by a servant, on its way to and from school. If it

rained, Madame Dellobelle would lament: "They will certainly be wet! They will not get in before the shower!"

And when the spring sun shone in all its glory, or the snow whitened the pavements in December, they only knew the change of the season by some new article of dress worn by one of their friends.

Now, on a certain day of which we write, the air was soft and mild; every one seemed to be anxious to be out-of-doors; every window was thrown wide open. *Désirée* and her mother, however, only sewed the faster, as they wished to make use of each ray of daylight. The voices of children playing in the street, the jingle of pianos, and the cries of some little merchant vaunting his goods, filled the air with an indefinable sense of spring. Madame Dellobelle at last put down her work, and stood at the window in the gathering darkness. "There is M. Sigismond! How early he leaves the factory to-night! The days are long now, however, and it must be after eight o'clock. Who is it with him?" she continued, to her daughter, without turning around. "Can it be— Yes, it certainly is Frantz! Look, my child!"

But the young girl did not move; her eyes were fixed, and her hands fell at her side. Her thoughts had taken wing to a far-distant land. The very name of Frantz, pronounced so carelessly by her mother, in consequence of a fancied resemblance borne by some stranger, was to her like throwing wide open the portals of her past and of her fu-

ture. Hopes, as fleeting as the color on her cheeks, came to whisper delusive words in her ear. She remembered, too, how in days that seemed so far away she had learned to know his step on the stair; to hear him as he drew his table nearer to the window. Alas! what quiet pain she had suffered, as he sat there on that low chair, and talked of Sidonie! The very tone of his voice returned to her; the soft and tender look in his eyes, as he spoke of his future happiness. The young girl's heart grew very heavy. The gathering darkness left only the square of the open window visible, near which still sat her mother. Suddenly the door opened: some one was there, though no one was to be distinguished. The Dellobelles rarely had visitors, and the mother thought it was some one from their employers.

“My husband has just taken our work home,” said Madame Dellobelle.

The man came forward, still silent; the last faint rays of light from the window fell upon his bronzed face and long, light beard.

“Do you not know me?” said a familiar voice.

“I knew you at once,” answered Désirée, in a cold and measured tone.

“Good Heavens, it is Frantz!” cried Madame Dellobelle, running to light her lamp. “And you have come back to your old friends!—Désirée, what an icicle you are! Why do you not tell him how glad you are to see him again?”

An icicle, indeed! and she was as white as one,

while the little hand, now held by Frantz, was as cold as snow. He thought her prettier than ever, while she looked up at his tall figure, full of admiration for his height and strength; but in his eyes she read a new expression, one of sadness and anxiety.

This anxiety came from Sigismond's letter, which had brought him at once. He came without waiting for permission from his employers, thus risking the loss of his position. His sadness was of an earlier date, and took possession of his whole nature at the time when the woman who had refused to marry him became the wife of his brother. It is true that before this marriage Risler had written to ask permission to be happy, and that in words so touching and so tender, that the violence of the blow was somewhat softened; but the wound was, nevertheless, very deep, and Frantz threw himself with violence into his profession, and hoped, by breathless toil all day, to win sleep and forgetfulness at night. But, in the anger and indignation that he now feels against his brother's faithless wife, there lingers no trace of his former love—contempt has taken its place. It was not as a lover, but as an avenger, that he came, and Sidonie must be on her guard! Instantly on his arrival the young man went to the manufactory, but no one was there. The shutters of the house at the end of the garden had been closed for two weeks. The gardener, Achille, informed him that the two ladies were in the country, and that their respective husbands went out of town every night. Frantz decided to speak to Sigismond,

but it was Saturday, pay-day, and he must wait until the crowd of operatives had left. Although impatient and out of spirits, Frantz experienced a keen pleasure in again finding himself in the whirl of life in the great city of Paris. In all these faces—some honest, others vicious—he read the same contentment, the same joy, at seeing the end of the week's labors. For them, Sunday evidently began at the cashier's desk, on Saturday evening, at seven o'clock.

The operatives turned away from the desk, rattling the money that glittered in their palms. There were murmurs and complaints sometimes, as they were informed of certain fines, or of hours that they had omitted; and above the tumult rose the calm, clear tones of Sigismond, as he defended the interests of his masters. Frantz knew the scene all by heart; he knew that those flitting shadows outside the door were the wives or daughters, waiting to lead their husbands or fathers home past the tempting wine-shops.

Sigismond was at last free. The two friends met cordially, and in the silent factory—now silent and empty for twenty-four hours—the cashier explained fully the existing state of things. Sidonie—her lavish expenditures, the honor of her home lost and sacrificed—he fully dwelt upon. Risler had just purchased a country-house at Asnières, the former dwelling of an actress, and they were there installed in the most luxurious fashion. They had carriages and horses, and numerous servants, and,

in short, lived like people of enormous wealth. But what occasioned old Sigismond the greatest uneasiness was the fact that for some time George had not applied to him for money, and yet Sidonie spent more than ever.

“My confidence is gone,” said the unhappy cashier, shaking his head; “my confidence is gone!” Then, lowering his voice, he added: “But your brother, Frantz—your brother! Who will explain to us what he is thinking about? He seems to be in a dream the greater part of the time. He thinks of nothing, cares for nothing, but this invention of his. Shall I tell you the question that every one is asking—‘Is the man a rascal or a fool?’”

The two men were walking in the garden. Frantz believed himself to be the sport of a bad dream. His hurried voyage; the sudden change of climate and surroundings; Sigismond’s rapid words; the entire revolution of his preconceived ideas of Sidonie, the woman he had so loved; of his brother, the man whose honor had always hitherto been unsuspected—all these things utterly bewildered him.

It was late. Sigismond proposed that he should go home with him; but Frantz refused, preferring to be alone. Mechanically he turned to his old quarters, and on the door saw the placard, “To be let.” It was the same room where he and his brother had lived together for so many years, and opposite glistened the Dellobelles’ little sign. Their door was half open. Should he go in? In the whole of Paris he could not have found a safer

shelter; it was like a harbor of refuge—a shore radiant with sunshine and peace, where women sat and worked, and children played; where the waters were calm and clear, while outside tempests roared and waves ran mountain-high; and, more than all, without his knowing it, Désirée's love for him created about her an atmosphere of gentle tenderness, that to his wounded, sore heart was inexpressibly grateful. Désirée, the little icicle, gradually thawed. They were talking with much animation, while Madame Dellobelle spread the table.

“ You will take supper with us, Frantz,” she said. “ My husband has gone to carry our work home, but he will return soon.”

The poor wife said this with a certain air of pride; for, in truth, ever since the melancholy disappointment attending his theatrical project, M. Dellobelle had taken all his meals in his own apartments, for he owed so large a bill at the restaurant that he really dared not return there. But he never failed, on Saturdays, to bring home with him one or two unexpected guests; so in a few moments he appeared, accompanied by two actors—one, wrinkled and shriveled, with an unmistakable air of the foot-lights; the other, buttoned closely to the chin, without the smallest evidence of linen visible. Dellobelle announced his visitors pompously at the door, but interrupted himself in the middle of his presentation by catching sight of Frantz. “ Frantz! my Frantz!” cried the old player, in a melodramatic tone, rushing forward with extended arms.

Désirée made a little face as she saw their visitors. It would have been so much more agreeable to have had no strangers there that evening; but her father cared little for this. His first thought was to empty his pockets. He drew out a superb *pâte*—"for the ladies," he said, forgetting that it was he himself who adored it. Then appeared a lobster and a huge sausage, some *marrons glacés*, and some early cherries.

Meanwhile one of the guests pulled up an invisible shirt-collar, and the other furtively watched the preparations for supper with hungry eyes. But Désirée thought with terror of the immense hole made by this improvised repast in their week's earnings, and Madame Dellobelle was at her wits' ends to find the requisite number of plates and knives.

The supper was gay enough for the actors, but to the two women and Frantz the worn-out anecdotes of the theatre had an odor of extinguished lamps and empty benches. The three men recalled their enormous successes, for in their own opinion they had been the greatest men on the stage; and while they talked they ate as actors eat—three-quarters turned to the audience, a napkin spread on one knee, alternate mouthfuls and phrases, expressing joy, terror, or surprise, by adroit management of the knife and fork.

Madame Dellobelle listened with a smile, for a woman cannot be the wife of an actor for thirty years without sympathizing somewhat in his eccentricities.

But at the corner of the table sat Frantz and Désirée. They talked in whispers, and heard little of what went on about them. Remembrances of their childhood, which were of little value, save that they gave them a past in common, made up the substance of their conversation. Suddenly Dellobelle interrupted them :

“ You have not seen your brother,” he said to Frantz, “ nor his wife yet, have you ? There you will see a *grande dame*, and such toilets and such style ! They have a superb establishment at Asnières. They are quite beyond us in these days—never a word ! never a visit ! As for me, you understand that I am totally indifferent, but for these ladies it is somewhat humiliating.”

“ O papa ! ” said Désirée, eagerly. “ You know that we love Sidonie too much not to excuse her ! ”

The actor struck the table with his fist. “ And that is precisely where you are in the wrong. If people insult you and humiliate you, you should not excuse them.”

For the fancied wrongs of the old comedian still rankled in his soul.

“ If you knew,” he said to Frantz, “ how close and grasping your brother has grown ! I asked him to lend me a small sum of money, which sum, small as it was, would have made my fortune. I offered him the best security ; but, if you will credit my words, he refused me point-blank. His wife, forsooth, must have it all ! She rides horseback, drives her pony-wagon, and altogether queens it

bravely! Between ourselves, my dear boy, I doubt if they are a very happy pair. That little woman will make him turn all the colors of the rainbow yet, if I am not mistaken."

And the old actor winked at his friends.

Frantz was thunderstruck. The horrible certainty was presented to him on all sides. Sigismond had spoken from his point of view, Dellobelle from his, but the result was the same.

Supper was over at last, and the three actors adjourned to the brewery to smoke. Frantz remained a while longer with the two women.

Seeing him there at her side, Désirée felt her heart swell with gratitude to Sidonie. Was it not to her generosity that she owed even this semblance of happiness, this poor, fleeting pleasure? And this thought enabled her to defend her rival and old friend.

"It is not necessary to believe all that my father has said of your sister-in-law, Frantz. He is sometimes given to exaggeration, you know. As for me, I am quite sure that Sidonie is incapable of the things of which she is accused. Her heart is the same as of old, and she loves her friends, even if she appears to neglect them a little. That is only natural, after all. Do you not think so, Frantz?"

How pretty he thought her as she was speaking! Her delicate, high-bred face, her pure coloring, and soft, tender eyes, charmed him. And, while she thus warmly defended her friend, Frantz Risler thought, with a throb of manlike selfishness, that

this girl had loved him, loved him still, perhaps, and that her heart was a refuge for him when tossed and wounded by the storms of the outer world.

All night in his old room, still rocked by his ocean-voyage, by the noise of waves and strong winds, he dreamed of the far-away days of his youth, of "little Chèbe," of Désirée, of their plays, and his school-days.

Then, when the morning sun glanced through his curtainless windows, and partially awakened him, he dreamed that it was the hour for his school, and that his brother opened the door on his way to the factory, and cried :

"Up with you, lazy-bones!"

That good, kind voice, too real for a dream, made him open his eyes wide, and start up.

There stood Risler, watching him tenderly, who in his joy at again seeing his brother could find no other words than the old ones, "I am so happy!"

Although the day was Sunday, Risler had come to the quiet factory, unable to keep longer away from the model of his beloved invention, and was there met by Achille, with the intelligence of the arrival of Frantz. He started off to the youth's old quarters, a little vexed that he had not been informed in advance by letter, and, above all, that Frantz had not gone out to Asnières instantly on reaching Paris. This vexation he at once expressed to his brother, who offered the excuse of excessive fatigue, and also a certain pleasure he had in again occupying their old room.

"I understand all that," interrupted Risler; "but now you are going home with me. Won't Sidonie be surprised? We often talk of you, and of our regret that you were so far away."

And the poor man, overwhelmed with joy, became silent, and looked with admiring eyes on the well-grown, broad-shouldered man before him. While Risler was thus occupied, Frantz, in his turn, examined the gentle, serious, and contemplative face of his brother.

"No; it is impossible," he said to himself. "He is the soul of honor, as he always was." Then recalling all the cruel suspicions of the people about him, his anger concentrated on that vain woman who deceived her husband so grossly that she ended by giving the world the right to look upon him as her accomplice. What a terrible explanation he should have with her! how severely he should speak to her! No subterfuges, but the stern, unvarnished truth would come from his lips. He thought of all this as they went their way on that lovely Sunday morning. The car was crowded. Risler sat opposite, and talked without stopping. He spoke of the manufactory, and of the fortune they were making; and how, when his invention was perfected, their profits would be quadrupled.

"But," said Frantz, uneasily, "are you quite sure of the success of your invention?"

"Sure? of course I am sure. I will show you all my plans; and next week, under my own eyes, the manufacture of my machine will begin. In

three months I shall have obtained my patent, and my invention will be at work. You will see, my boy, how money will pour in on me, and how happy I shall be to have it in my power to recompense young Fromont for all the kindness lavished on me by his father!"

Then he began to talk of his domestic happiness. Sidonie was the best of wives. They had a happy home, and had gathered a small but select circle about them. His wife sang like a nightingale, thanks to her teacher, Madame Dobson, who was a charming little woman. In fact, he had but one anxiety, one annoyance in the world, and that was a certain coolness that had arisen between himself and Sigismond; whence it came, or its cause, he knew not. Frantz, perhaps, would assist him in clearing up the mystery.

"Certainly I will," answered Frantz through his close-shut teeth; for he grew hot with rage that any one should venture to suspect a baseness hidden under such childlike frankness.

As they drew near Asnières, Frantz perceived a small house built like a miniature castle, all turrets and towers. The clear, crystal panes of the windows were shaded by rose-colored curtains; and on the green lawn glittered a huge metal ball. The river ran very near, and at the little wharf lay a flock of small boats, with the dust of the road on their pretentious names. From her windows Sidonie could see several restaurants, closed and silent during the week, but on Sundays running over with a

noisy crowd. The newly-grown grass was worn and yellow under their feet, and the whole aspect of the spot was thoroughly vulgar. Sidonie, a cockney in all her feelings, was delighted with it, for she had always heard Asnières spoken of as the most desirable of all country-places in which to reside ; for the number of trains permitted one to go into Paris every evening and return after the theatres. "Little Chèbe" had heard this from childhood, and Sidonie Risler was determined to fulfill all "little Chèbe's" dreams.

The two brothers let themselves in at the garden-gate. They passed the billiard-room, a few rods away from the house, and the conservatory-looking, the whole of them, like a toy villa that comes, for a child's amusement, in various bits that take apart and can be packed in a box—the whole affair light and airy, as if it would blow away in the first puff of wind.

Frantz looked about him. The long, broad windows, opening on a wide piazza, gave him a full view of the interior ; while a low, American rocking-chair, a table with a coffee-equipage upon it, and a cane-seated sofa, stood on the piazza. A piano was heard from within.

" Sidonie will be somewhat astonished," said her husband, as they carefully walked over the gravel ; " she does not expect me until night, and is practising with Madame Dobson." Just as he reached the door, he shouted loudly, " Guess who is with me ! "

Madame Dobson started up, while George and Sidonie appeared suddenly on the threshold of the boudoir.

“How you frightened me!” she cried, running to meet her husband.

The ruffles and flounces of her white *peignoir*, with its bows and floating ends of blue ribbon, rustled and waved as she moved. Already recovered from her brief embarrassment, she said, with her ever-ready little smile, to Frantz, “Welcome, my brother!”

Risler left them to each other, and turned to George, whom he was somewhat surprised to see.

“What! George, you here? I thought you were at Savigny.”

“Yes, I wanted to see you; and I supposed you would be here to-day,” stammered the young man.

Sidonie disappeared, and Madame Dobson continued at the piano, the half-subdued tones of which reminded one of the music that, at the theatre, occasionally accompanies or heralds critical situations.

Risler, with his customary good-humor, apologized to his partner, and took Frantz on a tour of inspection over the house. They went from the drawing-room to the stable, and to the conservatory; all was new and bright, but cramped and inconvenient.

“But,” said Risler, with a certain pride, “it cost an enormous sum of money.”

He insisted on showing his brother everything—gas and water on each floor, the automatic bells, and the English billiard-table—and all this with constant references to his young partner, who, in taking him into the firm, had opened such a brilliant future to him.

At each new effusion of Risler's, George Frontmont felt his very brow burn under the singular expression of Frantz's eyes.

At table, Madame Dobson was almost the only one who spoke; knowing, or rather believing that she knew, the entire history of her friend and hostess, she thought she understood the sulky anger of Frantz, an old lover, furious at being replaced; and the anxiety of George, disturbed by the unlooked-for appearance of a rival, appeared but natural to the sentimental singing-mistress. She looked first at one and then at another with an encouraging smile, and was filled with admiration of Sidonie's composure, and reserved her contempt and disdain for "that old Risler, that abominable tyrant!"

As soon as lunch was over, George announced his intention of returning at once to Savigny. Risler did not venture to detain him, as he thought of his dear "Madame George" all alone, but went to the station to see him off.

Sidonie and Frantz sat in a little arbor covered with clustering roses, while Dobson returned to her piano.

Sidonie sat in silence, looking off at the water.

Frantz, too, was silent. Suddenly, just as she opened her lips to speak, he said:

“I must talk to you.”

“Precisely,” she answered, gravely; “but come this way, we shall be less likely to be interrupted.” And they entered a small summer-house at the foot of the garden.

CHAPTER II.

EXPLANATION.

It was most fortunate that the hour had come for some stop to be put to Sidonie's reckless conduct. Her defiance of all *les convenances*—the luxury that she affected—the enormous sums of money that she lavished—all announced that the end could not be far away; that she would soon sink from the surface of the whirlpool in which she had been engulfed to the dark depths below; and that with her she would drag the honor of her husband, and perhaps the name and fortunes of a respectable house. Her present surroundings hastened her ruin. In Paris she was compelled to pay a certain regard to appearances, but in this village she was, as it were, utterly alone. A pistol-shot in a neighboring house—the melancholy ending of an intrigue as silly as it was disgraceful—only caused her to smile, and to long for “adventures.” The days on which she was not to be seen going or coming from Paris she spent in absolute indolence, wrapped in a white dressing-gown, never occupying herself with the details of her house. The servants robbed her constantly, but she knew nothing of it. Little by

little, she lost all ambition; she descended to her former shop-girl level, and even below it. From the respectable mercantile circles to which her marriage had raised her, she fell to the position of the women she saw about her. She imitated them in her dress and her manners, cut her hair short over her forehead like a Skye terrier, and for two months flourished as an absolute blonde, greatly to Risler's astonishment, who looked as if he had changed his doll.

As to George, these freaks amused him, and it was he who was the real master of the house.

To amuse Sidonie, he had procured for her a semblance of society, some bachelor friends, but no women—women have too good eyes. Madame Dobson was the only lady who crossed Sidonie's threshold.

Picnics, dinners, and water-parties, were arranged. Each day Risler's position became more ridiculous, more shocking. When he arrived at night, tired, heated, and badly dressed, he must go at once and dress for dinner.

“Hurry!” his wife would say.

He obeyed her injunctions, coming in perhaps after the soup had been sent away. The guests he hardly knew; they were George's friends, who had come to talk business at Risler's table. This magic word “business” explained and justified everything in Risler's eyes. The constant presence of George, the choice of the guests, and Sidonie's exquisite toilettes, were all in the interest of the great firm with which it was his pride and joy to be connected.

George, however, watched the increasing coquetry and recklessness of Sidonie with growing distrust and uneasiness. He made his appearance almost daily at her house, fearing to leave this artful, unprincipled nature too much to her own devices.

“Where is your husband, Claire?” her grandfather would say. “Why does he not come here oftener?”

Claire excused George, but she herself had at last begun to grow very anxious. The tears came to her eyes when she received the brief letters with which her husband coolly announced his detention in town: “Do not expect me to-night or to-morrow. Perhaps, the day after, I can get away.”

She dined sadly, opposite a vacant chair, and, without knowing the worst, felt that her husband was drifting away from her. He was out of spirits and absent-minded when he was compelled by circumstances to appear at Savigny. Claire, sustaining with Sidonie only the coolest relations, knew nothing of what was going on at Asnières, and, when George hurried off, followed him with eyes that in vain sought to discover the secret that drew him so constantly from herself and their child. Her husband was in no degree happier than she, for Sidonie seemed to take a perverse pleasure in tormenting him. She received the most compromising attentions from several persons. One Casaboni, an Italian tenor, introduced by Madame Dobson, went to sing with her every day. George appeared, too,

every afternoon, and began to think that Risler did not take sufficient care of his wife.

Had she been his wife, George thought to himself, he would have kept her in better order. But he had no right to control her, and from him she would not bear one word. Sometimes, too, with that invincible logic that makes itself felt even by fools, he argued that, as she had deceived her husband, so might she deceive him in his turn.

He spent his time in going from jeweler to jeweler, to procure some novelty, some surprise. How well he knew her, after all! He realized that he could retain her interest and her affection, such as they were, only so long as he could amuse her.

That day, however, had not yet arrived. She was living the life that precisely suited her—had all the happiness she was capable of feeling. In her love for George lingered no element either of passion or romance. He was merely a second husband, younger, but above all richer, than the other. Just before the arrival of Frantz, startled by some whispers that reached her ear, she had established her parents at Asnières, in her vicinity; and with a father willfully blind, and a mother tenderly unsuspecting, she gave herself an air of respectability, of the advantages of which she was beginning to be conscious.

Everything was thus arranged to her satisfaction, when suddenly Frantz Risler appeared on the scene, and she saw at once that her repose was threatened, and that war was to be declared between

them. In a minute her plan was formed, and the time had now arrived to put it in action.

The summer-house they entered was a circular room with windows on four sides. It was furnished for those warm days when the heat of the garden would be unendurable. A large divan ran round the whole wall, and a small lacquered table occupied the centre, covered with books and papers.

The walls were delicately frescoed, and the design was so exquisite—birds among pale pink and white roses—that it was like a dream of summer in itself; the windows were shaded with masses of green vines, so that the interior was delightfully cool and dark. The sound, too, of water—the river lapping the shores with a gentle ripple—added to the charm of the apartment. Sidonie threw herself carelessly on the divan, the soft folds of her white drapery swelling like sea-foam about her. Her head was slightly bent forward, and she looked up at Frantz with eyes that were openly rebellious—almost threatening in expression.

Frantz stood erect and very pale.

“Accept my congratulations, madame,” he said, as he looked about him. “You understand the full meaning of the word comfortable, I see.” And immediately, as if afraid to allow the conversation to wander from the point to which he wished to lead it, he said quickly: “To whom are you indebted for all this luxury—to your husband or your lover?”

Without moving, and without turning her eyes away, Sidonie answered :

“ To both.”

He was utterly disconcerted by this unexpected coolness.

“ You admit, then, that George Fromont is—?”

“ I admit nothing.”

Frantz looked at her ; notwithstanding her calmness, she was frightfully pale, and her eternal little smile no longer hovered about her lips.

“ Listen to me, Sidonie. My brother’s name, the name he gave to his wife, belongs also to me. Risler is blind and weak, and just for that reason it becomes my duty to defend him from the consequences of your attacks on his happiness and honor. Therefore I bid you say to M. Fromont that he shall not again enter these doors ; if he does—”

“ If he does ? ” asked Sidonie, after a moment’s pause, looking up from her rings, with which she had been playing.

“ If he does, I shall most assuredly inform my brother of all that is going on. My revelation will kill him, perhaps, but you may be sure that he will kill you first ! ”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“ Let him kill me ! —what of that ? ”

These words were said in so dreary a tone that Frantz, in spite of himself, felt an emotion of pity for this beautiful young creature who had so thrown away her life, who spoke of dying as if it were the end of all things.

" You love him, then," he said, in a tone slightly softened—" you love him, since you prefer death to giving him up ? "

She threw her head back haughtily.

" I ? Do you think I could love a man like that—a man without intellect or force ? No ; I accepted his attentions as I would have done those of the first man who came in my way."

" Why ? "

" Because it was necessary—because I was mad—because I had in my heart, and have still, a criminal love that I desire to uproot—it matters not at what price ! "

She had risen and stood in front of him, her eyes looking into his.

A criminal love ! What did she mean ?

Frantz was afraid to ask, for he understood by her look, by her attitude, that something terrible was in store for him ; but his self-assumed function of judge compelled him to ask.

" Who is it ? " he said, slowly.

She answered in a low, dull voice :

" You know very well that I mean yourself ! "

She was his brother's wife. For two years he had thought of her only as his sister. To him, too, this wife of his brother bore not the smallest resemblance to his former *fiancée*, and in his eyes it would have been a crime to recognize in her a single feature of the young girl to whom he had so often whispered the words, " I love you. " And now it was she who said she loved him !

The unhappy, bewildered judge stood silent. She, opposite, waited for him to speak.

It was one of those warm, damp days of spring, when the air is laden with the perfume of flowers and shrubs; the sweet voice of Madame Dobson floated through the open windows on the soft spring air, and from below came the gentle lapping of the waves.

“Yes, Frantz, I have always loved you,” said Sidonie; “I renounced this love in girlish ignorance, but it has grown with my years and with the wisdom that came with them. When I found that Désirée loved you also, I thought of the glory of self-sacrifice, and of her misfortunes, and I determined to make her happy, and I repulsed you that you might turn to her. But as soon as you were gone, I found that I had over-estimated my own strength. Poor little Désirée! will you believe that I have hated her ever since? The very sight of her occasioned me such keen anguish that I have never been near her in all these months.”

“But if you loved me,” asked Frantz, in low, half-frightened tones—“if you loved me, why did you marry my brother?”

She did not wince.

“To marry Risler was to bring myself nearer you. I said to myself: ‘I cannot be his wife, but I can be his sister; in that way I may love and care for him, and shall not live a life utterly apart from his.’ Alas! these were the simple struggles of a young girl, the folly of which only experience can

demonstrate to us. I could not love you with sisterly affection, Frantz; neither could I forget you; with another husband than Risler I might have done so. But he talked to me constantly of you—of your prospects—of your success and plans. And then, worse than all, your brother spoke to me in your voice; in his step, in his ways, there is a strange family resemblance, that haunts and bewilders me. I determined to seek some distraction. I offer no apology for myself—I simply state the bare fact of my utter misery. I listened to George in a moment of desperation, hoping that through him I could be drawn out of my life, which was monotonous, and gave me too much time for thought. But I swear to you, Frantz, that in this whirlpool of excitement and amusement, by which I have been engulfed, I have never ceased to think of you; and, if any one had the right to come here as an accuser, it was certainly not yourself, who has made me, unconsciously, it is true, precisely what I am."

She was silent, choked by her tears.

Frantz dared not look at her. The miserable man felt that his former passion had resumed its sway over his heart. Neither did he dare speak, for he felt that, did he open his lips, words of pity and of passion would escape.

He turned away in silence. As he reached the door, Sidonie darted after him—snatched his hand—hers was soft and warm—his icy cold. At that moment Risler's tall form passed the window. "They must be here, M. Chèbe," he said, gayly; "for we

looked in the arbor." So saying, he entered the room, accompanied by his father- and mother-in-law.

Madame Chèbe, for whom Frantz had always had a certain charm, welcomed him cordially; and her husband said, in a most patronizing tone, "And how is the canal at Suez getting on?"—while Risler talked loudly of killing the fatted calf for the returned prodigal, and then shouted to the singing-mistress :

"Madame Dobson—Madame Dobson! do, pray, sing something more cheerful, or play us a waltz, for my mother-in-law and I are perishing for a dance!"

"Risler, are you quite crazy?" cried Madame Chèbe, as her son-in-law drew her along the alley in a wild dance, for the good man was really intoxicated with joy.

For Frantz the day was one interminable series of agonies. Suez and his brother's invention were talked of until he failed to grasp the meaning of a single sentence. Sidonie was very silent, and seemed wrapped in her own thoughts; and Frantz, without daring to look at her, watched her blue-silk umbrella, and the undulations of her white drapery. How she had changed in these last two years! But had she improved? Then a horrible idea occurred to him. It was a race-day at Longchamps, and a constant succession of carriages rolled past, filled with women; or a low pony-wagon, driven by a woman with rouged cheeks, who sat stiffly forward,

her veil drawn tightly back, and her little sun-shade and whip held in her hand. She looked like a doll that was wound up for a certain length of time; nothing seemed really living about her, save her charcoaled eyes, that were immovably fixed on her horses' heads. Sidonie looked like these creatures—Sidonie could have driven George's horses in that same way. Frantz started! Was he not at that moment in George's carriage? Had he not drunk his wine? And did not all this luxury, by which he was at this moment surrounded, come from George?

It was shameful, revolting! He owed it to himself to expose the whole tissue of deceptions to his brother. Had he not come for that? But his courage was gone.

That evening, after dinner, Risler urged his wife to sing. He was anxious that she should exhibit all her new accomplishments to his brother.

Sidonie begged to be excused, but madame tossed her long English curls, and seated herself at the piano to play the accompaniment.

“But I know nothing—what do you wish me to sing?” She ended by deciding for herself. Pale and absorbed—in the flickering light of the candles, which seemed to exhale perfume with their light—so intense was the odor from the garden of lilacs and lilies—Sidonie sang a strange little creole melody, with quaint, provincial words, very popular in Louisiana, whence it had been brought and set to music by Madame Dobson:

“ Pauvre petit Mam’zelle Zizi,
C’est l’amou’, l’amou’, qui tourne la tête ! ”—

and in narrating the fate of the poor little Zizi, who had been driven mad by love, Sidonie herself assumed the air of a woman carried away by passion. With the pathetic cry of a wounded dove, she took up the melancholy refrain in the colonial *patois* :

“ C’est l’amou’, l’amou’, qui tourne la tête.”

The siren had not been judicious in her choice of a song. The very name of Zizi transported Frantz to the quiet room where sat Désirée Dello-belle—she who had loved him so patiently and so long. In her childhood she had been called Zizi, and the singer seemed to be extolling her charms and her fidelity. Again he was at her side, waiting for the tardy coming of her father. Yes, it was there and only there, Frantz said to himself, that he could find a safe shelter from the temptations that assailed him in this enervating, unwholesome atmosphere.

In Désirée’s love he would take refuge. He would go to her and say, “ Help me, save me ! ” And who knows that a pure and innocent affection would not fill his heart, to the exclusion of his present guilty passion ?

“ Where are you going ? ” asked Risler, seeing his brother rise abruptly as soon as the last bar of the song had come to an end.

“ I am going away—it is late.”

“ What of that ? You will sleep here, of course.”

He refused. His presence in Paris was absolutely necessary for certain matters of business intrusted to him by his employers. Again they entreated him, but he hurried through the garden, and soon took his seat in the train.

When he had gone, his brother went to his own room, but Sidonie and Madame Dobson lingered below. The music from a neighboring casino came to them broken by the regular, distant song of the boatmen on the river.

“A regular spoil-sport!” said Madame Dobson.

“Frantz, you mean?” asked Sidonie; “but I have checkmated him, I fancy: only, we must be very careful, for he is of an extremely jealous temperament. I must write at once to Casaboni, to tell him not to come here for some time. And you must go the first thing in the morning to see George; tell him to depart at once to Savigny, and to stay there for a fortnight.”

CHAPTER III.

POOR LITTLE MADEMOISELLE ZIZI.

AH ! how happy Désirée was in those days ! Frantz came every evening regularly, and he rarely mentioned Sidonie.

In the morning, as soon as she was seated at her work, a gentle tap was heard. "Good-morning, Mademoiselle Zizi !" for so he always now called her.

In the evening they waited together for the old actor ; and, while she worked, he told her of the strange new country which was to be his future home.

"What is it, my dear, that has so waked you up ?" said her mother ; for the lame girl, instead of sitting all day long, as had been her habit, now moved up and down the room, held herself very erect, and asked "if it showed when she was not walking."

Her simple dress was now rarely without its knots of dainty ribbon, and her beautiful hair was arranged with the greatest care. Every one noticed the change, and even her birds and beetles partook of its results, and had an entirely different air.

Yes, the young girl was very happy. For some days Frantz had spoken of an excursion into the country; and as the papa, always good, always generous, made no objection, they started early one Sunday morning.

You may imagine the anxiety with which Désirée retired the night before. When the girl opened her window at six o'clock, and saw the sweetness and freshness of the morning, and thought of the trees, the fields, and the flowers, that she had not seen for so long a time, and that she was to behold that day again, on the arm of the person dearest to her in the world, tears filled her eyes.

The evening before, Frantz had brought her a dainty silk umbrella with an ivory handle; and the girl had carefully arranged every detail of her simple costume. The result was altogether charming.

At nine o'clock precisely, Frantz appeared in a carriage. He sprang lightly up the stairs to summon his guests. Zizi came down without any assistance save that of the railing. Madame Dellobelle followed close behind, watching her daughter carefully. Dellobelle himself, a new overcoat folded on his arm, stood at the door of the carriage.

What a charming drive that was! The pure air, the waving trees, and brilliant flowers, filled the girl's heart with joy. Do not ask where they went. Désirée never knew. She could only have told you that no sun ever shone so brightly, no birds ever sang so sweetly, as those she heard that day. When she was much younger she had had an occasional

day of country pleasure ; but, as she grew older, ever-increasing pain aggravated by motion, the necessity of economizing every moment as well as every penny, had held her as by invisible bonds to that old quarter of Paris inhabited by her parents. Distant roofs, and the new red bricks of the Fromont manufactory, bounded her horizon, but the girl was not discontented. Therefore, for some time she had seen no flowers save what grew in pots on her window-sill ; no trees save the acacias waving in the summer wind in the Fromont garden. Thus what joy swelled her heart as she looked on the beautiful turf bejeweled with tiny flowers ! She clapped her hands in childlike ecstasy. Frantz kept near her, ready to aid her at every turn ; and this wonderful day passed like a heavenly vision. The great, blue sky seemed to float above the green branches ; the narrow glades with perhaps a gleam of the horizon in the distance, the flowers, and the vines, ravished and bewildered her.

Toward evening, when the sun was setting, and she saw the long lines of tremulous light on the river, and far away, between two hills, a thick, fog-like mass of roofs and steeples, and was told that there lay Paris, she cast one look at the lovely scene about her, and laid away in her memory all the exquisite landscape with its odor of hawthorn, as if never, never should she see it again.

The flowers that the young girl took away with her perfumed her room for days and days. The hyacinths and violets, the fair blossoms of the thorn,

were mingled with a crowd of smaller flowers, of which even the names were unknown to her.

In looking at them, how many times did little Zizi live over again each occurrence of that memorable day! The violets reminded her of the bed of moss where she had found them, and where, kneeling at the side of Frantz, she had gathered them. As she thought, she worked, and a gleam of sunshine, coming through a half-opened window, touched the breasts of the humming-birds on the table, and transformed the tiny feathers to glittering jewels. Spring and youth, hope and love, glorified this poor little work-room on the fifth floor.

Frantz by this time was equally happy. Désirée, by degrees, had won his heart completely. Even the remembrance of Sidonie, he fancied, had departed. He had never gone to Asnières again. "Come home with me," his brother had said; "Sidonie insists on your dining with us to-day." But Frantz pretended to be overwhelmed with business. It was easy, too, to induce Risler to accept this excuse. Each time that Frantz left his brother's office, he was intercepted by old Sigismond, his pen behind his ear, and his knife in his hand. He kept the young man informed of all that went on. George, he said, came regularly to his office, and went out to Savigny every night. No more bills had been presented to him for payment.

"You see," said the cashier, triumphantly, "I was quite right in sending for you to come home; but, all the same," said the good man, "I feel as

if we were all treading on the edge of a quick-sand."

"Have no fear," answered the engineer; "I am on the lookout."

"You will be here for some time longer, I hope?" asked the cashier, anxiously.

"Not for long. I have a matter of the highest importance to arrange before I go, however."

This matter was Frantz's marriage to Désirée. He had spoken of it to no one, not even to her, but little Zizi had no doubts, evidently, for she was as happy and as gay as a lark.

They were alone one Sunday afternoon—Madame Dellobelle had just gone out, proud and happy to show herself on her husband's arm, carefully dressed. Frantz had a certain festal air, and a look of suppressed excitement; and from the very way in which he drew his chair toward her sofa Désirée understood that he was about to say something of the gravest importance. Their conversation began by indifferent phrases; then came a long silence. At this moment a gentle tap at the door.

"Come in!" said Désirée, impatiently; and Sidonie appeared, beautifully dressed—smiling and gracious. She had just run in for a moment to see her little Désirée.

The presence of her brother-in-law seemed to astonish her greatly; but, amid her coaxing words to her friend, she had neither eyes nor ears for him. After a time, however, she asked to see the window on the staircase and the room where the

brothers had lived. It pleased her, she said, half sadly, to recall those days of her youth.

“Do you remember, Frantz, when the princess came to call on you, wearing on her little head a diadem of feathers?”

Frantz did not reply; he was too disturbed. Something told him that this woman had come there for him alone—that she wished to fascinate and intoxicate him—and he felt, with an emotion of mingled despair and rage, that he should fall into the net she thus spread. Désirée suspected nothing—Sidonie’s air was so gentle and friendly; besides, they were brother and sister; of course, there could be no question of love between them.

Nevertheless, the lame girl had a vague presentiment of coming sorrow, when Sidonie turned on the threshold, and said to her brother-in-law, carelessly:

“By-the-way, Frantz, Risler bade me bring you out to dinner; the carriage is at the door, and we will take him up as we pass his office.”

Then, with a half smile, she added:

“You will let us have him, Zizi, will you not? We will return him to you.”

And he went with her—without once looking back, swept away by his passion as by a furious sea; and neither that day nor the following one did poor little Zizi hear the words which had been on her lover’s lips.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WAITING-ROOM.

“I love you—I love you more than ever—and forever! Why struggle longer? Our passion is stronger than ourselves. We were destined for each other; is it a crime to fulfill our destiny? Come, then. To-morrow night, at the Lyons station, I shall expect you; be punctual—ten o’clock—the tickets will be taken, and I shall watch for you.

FRANTZ.”

For a whole month Sidonie had expected this letter—for a month she had sought to induce her brother-in-law to place on paper this written expression of his passion. It was not easy to pervert this young heart, naturally so frank and honest. When she believed him nearly subjugated, his sense of right conquered, and he was ready to fly from her forever. Therefore, when this letter was handed to her one morning, she was very triumphant. Madame Dobson was there; she had come laden with complaints from George.

“Ah, the poor fellow!” said the sentimental American; “if you could but see how unhappy he is!” And while she spoke she untied her music,

where she had carefully hidden his letter, only too delighted to have any part in this love-affair, where a tyrant of a husband was to be outwitted and punished. Singularly enough, while Madame Dobson had no objection to carrying love-letters to and fro, she had never written or received one herself.

When Sidonie showed her brother-in-law's letter to Dobson, the latter said, "And what did you answer?"

" 'Yes'—neither more nor less!"

"What! Do you mean to run away with this madman?" Sidonie laughed contemptuously.

"Not precisely. I said 'Yes,' so that he might wait for me at the railway-station. He deserves at least a half-hour of suspense. He has made me miserable for a month. I have changed all my daily life and habits. I closed my doors on my friends—beginning with George and finishing with yourself; for you know, my dear, that he was even out of conceit with you."

But Sidonie did not say that her strongest reason for her growing dislike of her brother-in-law was, that he had terrified her by threats of exposure to her husband. Ever since that day in the summer-house, she had felt ill at ease in his presence, and was haunted by a constant wonder as to what he would do should he ever learn the truth in regard to her. These cold, fair men often have fearful tempers—not tempers that are easily aroused, perhaps, but they remind one of those dangerous explosive mixtures, without color or odor, that one

fears to meddle with, because no one knows their full power. She shivered with dread as she thought that the evil day might be near at hand. Of her former life she had preserved various strange tales of dishonored homes, enraged husbands, and deeds of revenge. Visions of death haunted her waking hours as well as her dreams; and death, its eternal repose, its profound silence, terrified this poor, shrinking little creature, absorbed in pleasure, mad for excitement and amusement. This unfortunate letter put an end to all these fears; now it was impossible for Frantz to denounce her, even in a moment of rage, for he had placed a powerful weapon in her hand. The moment he opened his lips, that moment she would produce his letter, and all his accusations would seem to Risler the merest calumnies. She was radiant with delight; she threw her windows wide open to the sun and air, and at once issued multitudinous orders to cook and gardener. Her house must be made delightful, for was not George coming again? She made her arrangements for a large dinner at the end of the week. One would have thought that she had returned home after a month's seclusion in a convent, so eager was she for movement and life.

The next evening, Sidonie, her husband, and Madame Dobson, were together in the *salon*. Risler sat drawing at the table, while his wife sang at the piano to Madame Dobson's accompaniment. Suddenly she stopped in the middle of a bar and laughed aloud. The clock was striking ten. Risler

looked up in astonishment. "What is it that you find so amusing?" he asked.

"My thoughts!" answered his wife, gayly, as she directed the attention of her teacher to the clock. It was the hour named for the rendezvous at the station; and she was thinking of Frantz pacing the long platform in vain expectation of her coming.

From the moment that the messenger had taken to Frantz Sidonie's "Yes," his restless anxiety left him. The die was cast, and no retreat was now possible. He argued no more with himself; his conscience seemed hardened and seared. He calmly made all his arrangements—emptied his wardrobe, sent off his trunks, and then sat down in the vacant room, without one thought or pang for the young girl who would weep such bitter tears, without one thought of his brother's horror and despair. All this was to come later, but was now of minor consideration.

His mind was now concentrated on the anticipation of meeting Sidonie at the station. She would come closely veiled and in black, quiet and unobtrusive. He thought of the train flying through the darkness; of a small, graceful head and fair face lying among cushions, and two eyes that shone like stars; and still the train sped on. Later still, and a vision of the blue sea, of an unknown tropical land where they themselves were unknown, came to intoxicate and bewilder him. Two hours before the time for his train, Frantz was at the station

—the dreariest of all in Paris, the Lyons. He seated himself in the darkest corner, and sat as if carved out of stone; but his brain was as active as ever, although he asked himself several times where he was going, and for whom he was waiting. Mechanically he looked about, though far too early yet to expect Sidonie. In a half-hour, in fifteen minutes, he might begin to watch for her. Then began that horrible expectation that racks the nerves of the strongest. Poets have written of it, most of us have felt it. But to pass such moments in a dreary railway-station, with a noise of opening and shutting doors, a constant tramp of feet! The sense of the hurry and confusion is inexpressibly depressing. Frantz stood watching the carriages as they stopped at the platform. The doors were opened and noisily closed, while the faces of the occupants of the carriages were momentarily visible under the light of the lantern that hung from above.

A lady closely veiled, a young girl with her father, an elderly woman with her maid, but no Sidonie. Then he went outside, not being able to endure the heated atmosphere within. It was a damp evening in September; a light fog imparted to the carriage-lamps a far-away look; but none of the carriages contained Sidonie. The hour for the departure of the train was close at hand. He ran to the ticket-office. “Two tickets for Marseilles!” Obtaining them, he returned to his post of observation. At last he saw her; yes! in black—it was her figure; and with her was another woman, still smaller—

Madame Dobson, of course. But a second look undeceived him: it was a lady bearing a certain resemblance to Sidonie; a young man joined her; it was evidently a marriage-trip; the father and mother were there to see them on the train. They passed Frantz, and he saw them enter the car wherein were his seats. At this moment a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder: he turned, and saw M. Gardinois.

"I am right," said the old man; "you are going to Marseilles by this train, are you not? I shall start with you, but am not going very far." He then explained to Frantz that he had missed the train he wished to take: "For," he added, "I was detained by the great failure of to-day, by which I hope 'Fronton & Risler' won't suffer. But young people are never very careful. I must be off—they are going to shut the gate!"

Frantz hardly heard these disconnected sentences. The ruin of his brother, the utter demolition of the whole world, would not have disturbed him at that precise moment.

The ten-o'clock train puffed out of the station. He tried to think calmly—evidently she had missed the connection from Asnières—would she come later? He would wait. The young man seated himself. The book-stall was being put in order for the next day. Frantz recognized some volumes that he had in his room at Ismailia, or had read on board ship. But the book-stall is shut and locked, and he is deprived of this resource. Then the woman who sells her toys at the

corner wraps herself in an old shawl and goes away. The day was over for all these people. The thought of the long hours of wakefulness to come reminded him of the well-known room whose shaded light fell on a table covered with minute birds ; but this vision comes and goes—and leaves no sign behind. Suddenly he found that he was dying of thirst. The *café* was open ; he went in ; but, just as he lifted his glass to his lips, the notion that Sidonie was waiting for him, alone in the darkness outside, took such violent possession of his mind, that he rushed out, leaving his money and the untouched glass on the table.

She will not come. What had happened ? Who had detained her ? Was she ill, or was she overwhelmed by remorse ? But in that case she would have sent Dobson. Perhaps Risler had found the letter, Sidonie was so careless.

While buried in these reflections the night wore on ; the distant buildings whitened, and became distinct. What should he do ? He would go at once to Asnières, and find out the truth. The morning was chilly, and, as he hurried across the city, he saw a little crowd of working-people gathered about a placard on the wall. Ah ! had he but stopped to read it, he would have been saved many a pang of self-reproach.

Two or three hours later, when he reached Asnières, the sun had risen. The bridge and the wharf all had that fresh, clean look that gives one the indefinable impression of a new day. He saw his

brother's house, with its open windows and flowers on the balcony. He wandered about some time, before he ventured to enter the grounds.

Suddenly, some one spoke to him. It was Sidonie's coachman. "Good-morning, Master Frantz. You are up bright and early this morning!"

"Any news at the house?" asked the young man, trembling.

"No, sir; nothing."

"Is my brother at home?"

"No, sir; my master slept in town."

"Is there anybody ill?"

"Nobody that I know of," answered the coachman, somewhat astonished.

Then Frantz rang at the small door. He heard Sidonie's voice, notwithstanding the early hour.

She spoke eagerly.

"No—no cream—let the sherbet be well frozen, and be punctual—seven o'clock precisely." She was evidently deep in consultation with her cook; but the unexpected apparition of her brother-in-law did not disturb her in the least.

"Ah! Frantz!" she said, tranquilly. "I shall be at liberty in a few moments. We have a large dinner-party to-morrow; you have no objection, I trust?"

Fresh and smiling, in her loose white dressing-gown and dainty lace cap, she continued to arrange her dinner. On her face was not the slightest trace of anxiety or of sleeplessness. Her smooth brow and half-parted rosy lips offered a strange contrast to her lover's haggard face.

At last they were alone, and he could speak.

“ You did not receive my letter ? ” he asked.

“ Certainly I did ; what then ? ” She had risen to arrange before the mirror some of her numerous frills and ribbons, and continued, as she turned toward him : “ I received your letter, and was delighted to receive it. Now, if you feel any inclination to carry to your brother any of the reports with which you have frightened me, I will prove to him that you are impelled to do so by your mad jealousy—by a love that I rejected with horror and contempt. Be warned, my dear—and farewell ! ”

Happy as an actress who has made a great hit, Sidonie left the room, a half smile on her lips.

And he did not kill her !

CHAPTER V.

THE SEINE.

THE night of the unfortunate episode of the Lyons station, a few minutes after Frantz had quietly left his apartment, the illustrious Dellobelle went home, and threw himself into a chair, in that loose, disjointed fashion which he always adopted when things went wrong with him.

“Good Heavens!” cried his wife, whom twenty years of exaggeration had not yet hardened, “what is the matter?”

Before answering, the actor, who never failed to precede his smallest words with some play of his countenance, drew down his mouth as if he had swallowed some atrociously bitter morsel.

“It is certain,” he said, “that these Rislers are selfish and ungrateful, to say nothing of their ill-manners. What do you think I have just heard? That Frantz Risler has gone—left Paris without a word of farewell to me—without a word of thanks for all the hospitality that he has received under this humble roof! What do you think of that?”

Madame Dellobelle uttered an exclamation of regret and surprise, while poor Désirée neither

spoke nor moved. The wire she held did not tremble.

“ Why have I deserved this last humiliation ? ” asked her father, for it was one of his pleasures to believe that he was hated and insulted by the world in general.

Gently, and with almost maternal tenderness, Madame Dellobelle consoled her husband—petted him, and added some little dainty to their dinner. In fact, the poor fellow was this time sincere ; he was really hurt by young Risler’s abrupt departure. But beside this surface sorrow burned and throbbed an anguish so deep—a pain so keen—that words fail to describe it ; and yet the mother did not dream of it. Look at your child, Madame Dellobelle ! Look at that transparent cheek—those brilliant, tearless eyes ! Draw your child’s head to your loving breast ! Let her weep in your arms, so that her eyes, veiled by tears, cannot distinguish the distant object on which she has fixed her despairing gaze !

There are some women in whom the mother extinguishes the wife ; with others, the wife extinguishes the mother. Madame Dellobelle belonged to this latter class. Worshiping her husband, she fancied that her daughter’s mission in life was to minister with equal unselfishness to his numerous whims. The two had but one aim in life—to toil for the glory of this great man, to console him for his wasted and unappreciated talents. Never had her mother seen the rosy flush that tinted Zizi’s cheek when Frantz entered their work-room ; all

the sweet subterfuges of her daughter to insure the utterance of his name over their morning's work had been unnoticed. Never had the mother watched in anxiety the long hours of silence, the tears that came unbidden to the eyes of the young girl ; and if sometimes Madame Dellobelle said, " What are you thinking about ? " it was in a mechanical sort of way, that hardly merited the often-unheard reply.

Selfish natures like Dellobelle's exercise an extraordinary influence over their family circles ; each member learns to suppress his own emotions, to endure silently rather than annoy the idol by his useless complaints ; and may I ask how, in this case, the sad drama that darkened the life of poor Zizi could interest that great man, her father ? For more than a month (since the Sunday, in fact, that Sidonie had borne Frantz away in triumph) Désirée knew that she was no longer loved, and knew, too, who her rival was. She uttered no complaints of either, she only asked herself with weary questionings the reason of his return, and why he had lingered at her side. Like a condemned criminal in a dark cell, she had become accustomed to the sad obscurity of her daily life. A sudden gleam of sunshine showed her all that she had endured ; and, when that sunshine faded away again, her days were intolerable. How many tears had dimmed the brilliancy of her birds' wings, and how many hours had they rendered less burdensome, for her daily toil was the girl's salvation ! Had her mind and hands been unoccupied, the misery in her heart would

have driven her to desperation. But, while Frantz was in Paris, hope did not altogether desert her. She heard his step in the corridor, and sometimes, even, through her half-open door, caught a glimpse of him, as he hurried up or down the stairs. He did not look happy. Why should he? she thought; did he not worship a woman whom it was a sin for him even to think of? That he would return to her again as a lover she knew was impossible, but she thought it very probable that he would come to her some day, sore and crushed, and ask her to pour some oil into his wounds.

But now she had been told that Frantz had gone; gone without a look or a word. He had been guilty, first, of a lover's treachery, and now of a friend's! Where could she turn for aid in this terrible hour? Her mother would not understand her, and would beg her not to disturb her father.

Sidonie! Alas! she knew now that she had better hope for consolation from her little birds, whose expressionless eyes drove her mad with their glassy stare. Her work no longer interested her; her hands were as weary as her heart! Who but her Father above could aid her now? Alas! she did not even think of him.

In Paris—in those narrow, dingy streets—the blue heavens seem so far away; between the sad, uplifted eyes and the sky intervene fogs and clouds, and life is so hard for the greater part of these people, that, if the thought of a watchful Providence occurs to them, it is as an avenger and a tyrant.

This is why there are so many suicides in Paris. These people, who know not how to pray, are nevertheless ready to die. Death seems to them a deliverer and a consoler.

It was thus that the little lame girl thought. She would die—but how? Motionless in her chair, while her mother prepared dinner, and her father recited a long monologue against the ingratitude of human nature, Zizi decided on what she should do.

Never alone, it was useless to resort to charcoal. Never going out, it was in vain for her to think of purchasing a little package of white powder, that she could carry about with her for days, in her pocket, with her handkerchief and thimble. There was, to be sure, the window opening on the street; but the thought of giving her parents the shock of seeing her mangled remains—the remembrance of the inquisitive crowd—all decided her to relinquish that plan. Nothing, then, was left but the river, whose waters might carry her so far off that she would never be seen again.

She shivered as she thought of the river, but it was not with fear of the deep, black waters; a Parisian *grisette* thinks little of that: she could throw her shawl over her head, and she would not see it. But she would have to go through the streets alone, and at night, and that thought terrified her.

While little Zizi sat in silence, with her soft eyes distended and fixed on vacancy, her father dined comfortably, and then sallied forth to the theatre,

first ascertaining that he had some money about him for emergencies.

“The dear man made a good dinner,” said his wife, “and I am glad of it, for he needed it.”

“Yes, that will be terrible to go alone into the street; I must wait until the gas is all out in the corridors, and when my mother is asleep I will creep down the stairs, and out into the street, where I shall meet men that will stare at me, and perhaps speak to me!”

This timidity Désirée had felt since childhood. For, when she was little, and was sent of an errand, the children in the street had mocked her, and followed her as she limped along. Now, she feared the omnibuses and carriages; the river was so far off—how tired she would be! But there was no other thing for her to do.

“I am going to bed, my child—how much longer do you mean to sit up?”

With her eyes on her work, Désirée answered that she must finish her twelfth bird.

“Good-night, then,” said her mother, whose failing sight could not bear the bright light. “I have put your father’s supper by the fire—look at it the last thing.”

Désirée had told the truth. She meant to finish the dozen, so that her father could take the work home in the morning; and no one would have supposed, who looked in on that peaceful scene, that within that little blond head so fatal an idea was developing itself.

The bird was finished—a wonderful bird—whose wings were green, like the deep sea, and whose breast glowed like a living sapphire. She carefully placed it with the others in the paper box. Each needleful of silk was gathered up—the pins and needles placed in the cushion. She turned the dish that held her father's supper, and lowered the lamp, so that everything should wear its ordinary look. Finally, Désirée took a small shawl from the wardrobe, and went calmly forth, without one look at her sleeping mother; for at last, in this supreme moment, she fully understood to what a selfish love her childhood and her youth had been sacrificed. She knew, only too well, that a word from her father would console her mother. When one voluntarily chooses death, it is with a cry against the injustice of man, and the pitilessness of Fate.

At last, she is in the street. All is quiet in this secluded quarter; but on the boulevards there are still noise and lights. Désirée walked quickly, with her shawl drawn about her slight figure. Without looking to the right or the left, she went straight on. The wind blew in her face, and the air felt damp as if it came from the river, which seemed itself to recede as little Zizi advanced.

Did you ever see a wounded bird running along on the ground, dragging its broken wing, seeking only some shelter where it may die in peace? Désirée's little figure and hesitating walk would have recalled involuntarily to your mind the image of

this wounded bird. And to think that, on the same night, almost at the same hour, and among the same streets, another person wandered, equally unhappy, equally desperate! If they could have met—if she, without looking up, had stopped him, and said, “Tell me, if you please, sir, the way to the Seine?” and he would have exclaimed, “Mademoiselle Zizi! in the name of wonder, why are you out at this hour?”—she would have burst into tears, and he would have wrapped her about with his strong arms, and told her that he needed her for a comforter and a guide. But meetings like these, in spite of all that poets say, do not often happen in real life, and real life is a hard mistress; and when sometimes such a very slight thing would turn bitterness into joy, she sternly refuses to grant that trifle. In this melancholy truth is to be found the reason why romances of real life are always sad.

Street after street, then a square, and, finally, a stone bridge and the river—an autumnal fog hung over it—and it was here that she meant to die. She felt so little, so desolate, in this great city, it seemed to Désirée that she was already dead. She went toward the bridge, when suddenly an odor of fresh flowers, of wet moss, and damp earth, came to her. She stood still. On the very edge of the sidewalk lay a bundle of shrubs, their roots tied up in moss; and a number of flower-pots, each in its paper, showed that they were in readiness for the early market. The women sat by, enveloped in shawls, and half asleep. Chrysanthemums of all colors,

mignonette, and roses, filled the air with their delicate perfume.

Poor little Désirée! The rare joys of her youth, the memory of her brief happiness with her lover, all rushed over her. She walked softly through these flowers. She remembered the day in the country with Frantz: that breath of Nature, that she enjoyed for the first time that day, came again to her as she was about to die. "Do you remember?" the flowers seemed to say, as they swayed gently toward her. "Ah, yes, I remember!" she answered, with a vague smile on her girlish lips.

She remembered only too well. At the end of the wharf the little figure stops at the steps which lead down to the boats.

Presently loud cries were heard—steps ran up and down the wharf. "Quick! a boat!" A policeman and a sailor appear as by magic on the scene. A boat, carrying a lantern, is pushed off.

The flower-merchants are roused. And when one of them asks, with a yawn, what the matter is, the woman at the coffee-stall answers calmly, "It is a woman who has just been fished out of the water."

It is true—the river refused even its protection to the poor child. Look where in the light of the lanterns a little group is gathered—she is saved! By degrees the people disperse, the flower-merchants return to their seats and doze again, and on the deserted wharf the chrysanthemums shiver in the cool night-wind.

Ah, poor girl ! You thought it an easy, simple thing to disappear out of life. You did not know that, instead of bearing you swiftly away, the river would reject you, and condemn you to all the shame and suspicion that must necessarily belong to your future life. First came the police-station, with its dirty benches, and its floor as wet and muddy as the streets themselves. There Désirée must spend the night. They had placed her on a camp-bed, before the fire, charitably replenished on her account, the excessive heat of which soon made her wet clothing steam. Where was she ? She hardly knew. Men were asleep all about, and the frightful oaths of two drunken prisoners in the next room horrified her. Near her crouched a woman in rags—she was mad—a poor creature who harmed no one, but who nodded her head constantly, and kept saying: “Ah, yes, misery—you may well say so ! Ah, yes, misery—” And this melancholy refrain, uttered in such a scene, made the poor child feel as if she should go mad herself. She closed her eyes, that she might not see this melancholy personification of her own despair.

At last daylight pervaded the large room. Zizi awoke suddenly, threw off the covering, and rose, determined, notwithstanding her fatigue and a burning fever, to escape from this place and from the eyes that watched her.

“Gentlemen,” she said, timidly, “let me go home to my mother.”

Hardened, as they were, by the constant occurrence of such dramas, the good men understood

that they now had to deal with a case totally out of the common way. But they could not take her home yet—they must first obtain permission. A carriage was ordered, out of pity for her; for a curious crowd had gathered at the door, to see the little lame girl appear. She was driven to the police-court, and entered the dingy room shivering, but with cheeks red with shame and fever. The judge hardly looked up from his paper.

“Ah!” he said to Désirée, “it is you, then?”

The policeman began to read his report: “At a quarter before twelve the aforesaid Dellobelles, aged twenty-four, a maker of artificial flowers, residing with her parents, at No. — Rue de Braque, attempted suicide by throwing herself into the Seine, from which river she was rescued by Grégoire Parchemint,” etc., etc.

The judge divided his attention between this report and his finger-nails, which he was carefully trimming, gave an occasional shrug of his shoulders with the air of a man who says, “What else could one expect?” At the end he turned sharply on the aforesaid Dellobelles, and admonished her in well-turned periods. “It was infamous,” he said, “it was cowardice, to do what she had done! What had driven her to such madness?”

Désirée could not answer. How could she have told, in such a presence, the sad story of her love and her sorrow? She murmured, with purple lips, still shivering with cold, “I do not know.”

Out of all patience with what he regarded as

willful obstinacy, the judge finally gave her permission to go home, first extorting from her the promise that she would not repeat her attempt at suicide. She entered the carriage, but her martyrdom was not yet over. The policeman who was with her was too kind, and, when he took her hand, the frightened girl retreated to the corner of the vehicle in tears; and, when she reached her home, she saw a crowd about the door. The startling intelligence had preceded her, and the neighborhood was in a wild state of excitement. At first they had heard only of her disappearance. Had she eloped with Frantz Risler? Dellobelle himself had run down the street at an early hour, without any hat; and the *concierge*, going up at once to their room, found Madame Dellobelle half crazy. In vain had the poor mother looked for some trace of her daughter—something, however trifling, that would throw a light on her departure.

She remembered, too late, her child's silence and lassitude; the depression of the last month, following so quickly on her previous gayety; and she remembered that for days she had not spoken of Frantz.

"Do not weep," her husband said; "I will find her."

And the poor woman wandered through her rooms, and out into the corridor, to look from the window; she preferred to stand there and watch, for Désirée's vacant chair seemed to breathe silent reproaches.

Suddenly a carriage stopped, and voices from below called to her: "Your daughter is here, Madame Dellobelle, safe and sound!"

It was indeed Zizi whom she met ascending the stairs, pale and half fainting, assisted by an unknown man. Seeing her mother, the girl smiled vacantly.

"Do not be frightened," she said, "it is nothing." Her mother ran toward her, lifted her child in her arms, as if she had been a baby, covered her with kisses, and overwhelmed her with loving reproaches.

"My 'darling!'" cried the mother, "tell me that it is not true that you tried to kill yourself. What is your secret sorrow? Trust your mother, my child!"

And, looking at her, Désirée saw that Madame Dellobelle had aged by ten years. The anxiety and sorrow of the last few hours had told sadly on her feeble frame. And Zizi thought herself unloved!—and that she could slip out of the world unnoticed and unmissed!

"When I saw your bed undisturbed this morning," said her mother between her hysterical sobs, "and then found you were not in the work-room, I fainted away. Are you warm now? Do you feel better?" And she took the slender, ice-cold feet into her bosom to warm them.

Désirée, in the long days of delirium that followed, lived over and over again each event of that horrible night: if she fell asleep, she woke with a start, and cried aloud to her mother, "Hide me! mamma, hide me—I am ashamed!"

The judge, had he been there, would have been quite certain that Zizi would never make a second attempt at suicide. But a longing for death, rest, and peace, was to be read on her pale face, and "the aforesaid Dellobelle" knew that she would not have long to wait.

The physicians called the disease of which she would die pneumonia; but the girl knew better: yet it was not a broken heart that killed her. No; since that night the girl had thought no more of Frantz, and considered herself alike unworthy of loving or of being loved; for her pure life was stained and soiled.

Each feature of that frightful tragedy stood out clear in her memory. Her being dragged from the water amid that crowd of rough men; her sleep of exhaustion at the police-station; the vulgar songs she had heard; the melancholy words of that mad woman sitting in the red light of the stove; the worthless creatures with whom she had mingled; the sneers of some, the impertinences of others, and the familiarities of the policeman who had brought her home—all had forever destroyed her maidenly reserve and womanly purity. Even her lameness was another feature in her martyrdom, and she fancied the judge in the court-room saying to himself as he looked at her, "The idea of a girl like that having the presumption to love any man, and to kill herself because he would not love her in return!"

She was simply dying of shame. In the long nights of feverish delirium, she repeated, without

a moment's cessation—"I am so ashamed!—so ashamed!" And, when she was somewhat calmer, she would cower under the coverings, as if to hide or bury herself from all human eyes.

Near Désirée's bed, or at the window, sat Madame Dellobelle, busily at work, for it is one of the miseries of the poor that they have not time to grieve. They must toil on, even in the shadow of the death that is hourly drawing nearer to those they love. The rich can encompass themselves about with their sorrows; but the poor cannot. I once knew an old woman who in the same year lost her daughter and her husband—two terrible blows, the one after the other; but she had a large family to care for, and a farm to manage. From sunrise to sunset she was busy, overseeing and directing. "But, Sundays," said the widow to me—"Sundays, I am happy." And what was this woman's idea of happiness? It was that in the loneliness of her room she could pass the day on her knees, praying and weeping for her lost husband and child.

But Madame Dellobelle had not even her Sunday. Remember that she was the only one to earn bread for her family, and her fingers were not so dexterous as her daughter's. Medicines were expensive, and she could not deprive her husband of one of his comforts. Thus, at whatever hour the girl opened her eyes, she beheld her mother at work; and when the curtains of her bed were drawn, she heard the little metallic click of the scissors as they were laid on the table.

Seeing her mother's fatigue was one of Désirée's greatest sorrows. "Give me some work," she would say, trying to raise herself in her bed. Her mother, seeing in this wish an indication of returning interest, gladly drew the pillows up to sustain the fragile form; but the needle was too heavy, the eyes too weak, and the street-cries brought back to the girl the memory of the narrow lanes through which she had wandered "that night."

No, she had no wish to live.

The mother looked at her pale child. "Are you comfortable?" she asked.

"Perfectly so," said the girl, and a faint smile flickered over her sad face, showing all the ravages made by her illness and grief, as the ray of sunlight, creeping into the dwellings of the poor, instead of brightening them, only brings out their desolation and discomforts. The mother dared not speak lest she should weep aloud; and the daughter, stupefied by fever, was already wrapped in the shadow of approaching death.

The illustrious Dellobelle was rarely there. He had not changed his daily habits in the smallest degree. Nevertheless, he knew that his daughter was dying; the physician had told him so. Had he loved his child—but in this singular nature the truest and most natural emotions acquired a certain meretricious air; in the same way that, if a placard is fastened crookedly on a wall, every word on it looks crooked too.

Dellobelle aired his grief, and played with suc-

cess the part of a broken-hearted father. He was seen at the theatre, and at the *café*, with tumbled hair, red eyes, and a pale face ; and liked to be met by sympathizing questions, to which he replied by compressed lips, by closed eyes, and by a melancholy shake of the head.

But he was full of thoughtful attentions for his child during her illness. He brought her flowers, but was not content with the simple violets that are to be found at every street-corner. In these gloomy autumnal days nothing would content him but roses and pinks, or white lilacs, bleached under glass, leaves and flowers alike white and ghostly.

“ It is too much ! too much ! ” said the sick girl each day as he appeared, bouquet in hand ; but he replied in so lofty a tone that she soon ceased to remonstrate. Nevertheless, it was a great expense, the burden of which fell on Madame Dellobelle. But, far from complaining, the poor woman thought this extravagance very noble on the part of her husband. This contempt for money filled her with admiration, and she was more impressed than ever with a belief in his talents.

He also, even amid all the mournful lessons of his wasted life, never doubted his own genius ; but a little hot hand was to lift the veil from his eyes.

One night, Désirée awoke in a singular state ; but the physician had found her, some hours before, very much better—with her fever all gone. He did not attempt to account for the change, nor did he say that the improvement was more than temporary.

“Let us wait,” he said, gravely, hoping that it might be one of those singular efforts made by Nature and youth. Had he looked under Désirée’s pillow, he would have found a letter post-marked “Cairo”—four pages, signed by Frantz—four pages of confession and explanation.

It was a letter such as the sick girl had dreamed of in past days. Had she herself dictated its words, she could not have found any so tender and loving. Everything that could soothe her wounds, and spare her delicacy, was there. He implored her pardon, narrated to his faithful little friend the temptations to which he had been exposed, and all his struggles. He bade Désirée to distrust Sidonie; and, with a clearness of perception born of his former passion, he described her heartlessness, her untruthfulness, and her total lack of principle.

Had that letter reached Zizi but a few days earlier! Now all its tenderness was like food brought too late to a man dying of hunger: he sees it, smells it, but cannot swallow it. Over and over again the sick girl read this letter. She drew it from the envelope, kissed it lovingly, and, even through her closed lids, saw its every word, and the color of the stamp. Frantz had not forgotten her! and she fell asleep, as if her head had been on his shoulder. Suddenly she awoke, and, as we said before, in a most extraordinary state; she felt all nerves, and yet as if she held on to life with but the slenderest thread. It was night, and the room in which she lay was in shadow. The lamp, half turned

down, lighted only the scattered work-table, and poor Madame Dellobelle's sleeping face.

Désirée's whole past came back to her: forgotten incidents of her childhood; scenes that, at the time, she had not understood; words heard as in a dream—all returned.

The child was bewildered, but not terrified. She did not know that, very often, death is heralded by just such excessive excitement of sleeping faculties.

She saw her father through the open door. Her mother lay back in her chair, utterly worn out, and all the traces of years of misery and of toil were visible on her worn face. During the day they were, in a measure, masked by the will and by constant occupation; but sleep brought them out. The deep wrinkles and reddened eyelids, the scanty hair—already white on the temples—were all to be seen, and Désirée saw them all. How she longed for strength and power to kiss away all those wrinkles! Dellobelle offered the strongest possible contrast. With a napkin thrown over his knee, he sat eating his supper, and at the same time reading his newspaper. For the first time in her life, Désirée noticed this contrast between her father and mother: her mother in her scanty black dress, thin and haggard; her father, wearing a new coat, hale and hearty: and she understood the difference in their lives and natures. The atmosphere of habit, which weakens the vision of children, had vanished for her; she judged her parents as if she were not their daughter.

What would become of her mother when she was gone? Would she patiently toil on, until worn out, and then would her selfish companion, too indolent to work himself, permit her to starve? And yet he was not cruel; he was only absorbed in himself and in his futile ambition. Should she try to arouse him? Should she try and tear away the thick bandage with which her father had for so many years covered his eyes? It was only a loving hand like her own that could attempt such a delicate operation. She alone had the right to say to him :

“ Give up these foolish dreams of a theatrical career. Work, through the day, and, if it must be, part of the night too, at some honest trade.”

Then, as if she were bidden to hasten by some invisible lips, she summoned all her courage, and called him softly :

“ Papa, papa!”

At the sound of her voice, the old actor hurried to her side. He had been at the first representation of a new play, and had come away enchanted and excited. He entered his daughter’s room with a beaming face, and a camellia in his button-hole.

“ Not asleep yet, Zizi?”

And his words were said so lightly that they resounded strangely in that sad and silent room. Désirée made a sign to him to be quiet, and pointed to her sleeping mother.

“ Come here, I want to speak to you,” she whispered. Her voice trembled, and her widely-opened eyes had a strange, far-away look.

Somewhat startled, he bent over her, with his camellia in his hand.

“What is it, my dear? Do you feel worse?”

Désirée shook her head, but beckoned him to come nearer; she laid her hot hand on his, and whispered that she was ill, and had not long to live. “Then, papa, you will be alone with mamma. Do not tremble—I am not afraid for myself, but I dread lest mamma should not be strong enough to do everything. Look, how pale she is!”

The actor turned, and seemed astonished at the sad face he saw.

“She has never been very strong,” he said, calmly.

This selfish reply, and, above all, the tone in which it was made, confirmed Désirée in her intention.

“What will become of you both when I am not here? Yes, I know, you have great hopes and expectations, but they will never be realized. Dear father, I do not wish to hurt your feelings, but it seems to me that, at your age, with your intelligence, you ought to be doing something. Mr. Risler, I am sure, would—” She spoke slowly, choosing her words with care, and waiting a moment after each sentence; but the actor did not yet grasp her meaning. He listened intently, with a vague consciousness that he was being accused of something; but of what, he had no idea.

“I think,” continued Désirée, timidly, “that it would be far wiser to relinquish—”

“ What ? ”

She stopped, astonished at the effect of her words ; for tears, real tears, rose to her father’s eyes. He understood her now. Of the only two admirers left to him by a cruel fate, one had now deserted him ! His child no longer believed in him ! It was not possible ! Before the mute entreaty of his gaze, Désirée’s courage fled ; besides, her strength was exhausted.

She murmured, “ Give up—give up— ” Her head fell back on her pillows, and she died, without having dared to say what she wished him to give up.

The “ aforesaid Dellobelle ” is dead, Sir Judge ! She told you that she would never again make an attempt at suicide, and she did not break her word. This time Death came to her, and took her away. And now, incredulous judge, you may accept the evidence of four stout oak-planks instead of her childish assurances.

Désirée’s death made a sensation in the neighborhood. Not that she was so great a favorite, for she went out rarely, and was comparatively little known. But, of course, at her burial, there would be a great many actors, and Paris adores that class. It likes to see them in the street, off the stage ; it likes to see what is real, and what is artificial, about them ; so that, when that narrow door on *La Rue de Braque* was seen hung with a white scarf, the curious had much to say.

To do them justice, actors, if not always harmo-

nious, have a certain external sympathy which they gladly demonstrate on all public occasions—balls, concerts, and funerals.

Although Dellobelle's name had entirely disappeared from the play-bills, and was thoroughly unknown to the rising generation of theatre-goers, it only needed a couple of lines in an obscure paper—“M. Dellobelle, formerly attached to the principal theatres of Alençon and Metz, informs his friends and associates,” etc.—to bring out the actors of Paris in full force.

Famous or not famous, unknown or celebrated, they were all there: those who had played with Dellobelle in the provinces; those who had met him in the *cafés*, where he was always to be seen, among the hundred others, to whom it would be difficult to give a name, but whom one recalls, because one sees them constantly, and they form a portion of the scene.

All these people expected to see their names in the list of those present at the funeral. They live in such constant fear of being forgotten by a fickle public, that they grasp every opportunity of thrusting themselves into notice.

The day arrived. All the windows in the neighborhood were filled with faces. A crowd was gathered in the Rue de Braque, waiting for the coming of the funeral guests. Here they are, some on foot, others in carriages, easily to be recognized by their well-shaven faces and exaggerated gestures. The different manner in which these good people mani-

fested their emotion on this painful occasion was very remarkable. Each entered the hall as if going on the stage ; one dashed a tear from the corner of his eyes with his gloved finger ; another stood still for a moment, the left foot thrown slightly forward and the hand pressed on his breast. "Be quiet, heart !" this one seemed to say. This was acting, and yet was sincere.

As soon as they were in the rooms, the actors separated into two distinct classes ; those who were of a certain celebrity gathered together and looked with contempt at the unknown comedians, who in their turn whispered quite audibly : " Do you see how So-and-so has changed ? How old he has grown ! "

Dellobelle vibrated between these two groups ; the poor fellow was half broken-hearted, but his grief did not prevent him from carefully curling his hair, or being anxious in regard to the fit of his gloves. Had any one been able to look into his very soul, it would have been impossible to say where his real sorrow ended and where his pretense began, so closely were they interwoven.

M. Chèbe darted about, more important than ever, while his wife remained above with the poor mother.

Sidonie did not appear, but her husband was there—the good friend who had defrayed all the expenses of this last ceremony, and who seemed as overwhelmed by grief as the father himself. The carriages were superb, and the hearse was a bank

of roses and white violets. The funeral procession started: at its head walked Dellobelle, shaken by sobs; thinking more of his own sorrows, of the father burying his only child, than of the child herself. Far below his sincere grief lay his intolerable personal vanity, as at the bottom of a river lies a huge rock, motionless in spite of storms and waves. The pomp of the ceremony, the long procession, the closed carriages, and Sidonie's *coupé*, all flattered and excited him, in spite of the gnawing pain at his heart. Dear little Zizi, so good and so simple!—all this was for her.

Happily, above, at the window of the old work-room, stood Madame Dellobelle, who could not be prevented from watching the procession depart. Behind the closed blinds she waved her thin hand. "Farewell," murmured the mother, almost to herself—"farewell, my darling!" and, softly as the words were spoken, Désirée heard them.

BOOK IV.

CHAPTER I.

PERPLEXITIES.

ONE night, toward the end of the following January, Sigismond Planus sat in his little home at Montrouge. "It is of no use," he said to himself, "for me to go to bed, for I cannot sleep." And in truth the old cashier had an excellent reason for anxiety—two large payments to be made, and no funds on hand. What was to be done? Sigismond had tried several times to speak of the matter to young Fromont; but George avoided all responsibility, and only appeared in his office at intervals, and then was always in a hurry. To the anxious questions of the cashier, he would only answer, pulling his mustache, "Don't trouble yourself, Planus, it will be right"—and had the air at the same time of not knowing what he said, of thinking of something else. The report gained ground in the factory that Sidonie was as faithless to him as she had been to her husband, and that this made him very unhappy. In fact, he was more occupied by Sidonie's

follies than by his business difficulties. As to Risler, he was rarely seen ; he passed his life watching the manufacture of his new machines. This indifference of the firm to their own interests disorganized the whole manufactory. Workmen and clerks took their ease, came late in the morning, and left early, paying little attention to the bell. Much business was still transacted, it is true, because a large house like that can go alone for some time after it has had a good start ; but what disorder and rottenness under the apparent prosperity !

Sigismond knew all this. But what could he do ? Where could he get the money ? He must collect all outstanding debts—humiliating as it would be to do so, and dangerous in one way, as such a step would show that their house stood in dire need of every penny. But this was better than to have their notes protested.

“I will start to-morrow early,” sighed the cashier. While the poor man tosses and turns on his sleepless couch, we will take a look at an attic in the Boulevard Beaumarchais, where for some little time the Dellobelles have been living.

Alas ! Désirée had not been mistaken in her predictions. Her mother had not been able to continue her employment. Her eyes were weakened by tears, and her birds all had a doleful air, as if they had been rained on. She gave them up, and took to sewing ; she repaired laces, and “did up muslins.” But her earnings grew smaller and smaller, and Dellobelle finally got into a habit of

running up little bills. He owed his tailor, too, and his bootmaker; but he was more anxious in regard to his still unpaid account at the restaurant, which he had assured his creditor should be paid on the 1st of February. If he did not keep his word, everything would be seized and sold.

The furniture was poor enough, to be sure, but it had been theirs ever since their marriage. For twenty years he had eaten his supper on the end of that long table; and to see Zizi's arm-chair carried off would break his wife's heart—that chair, about which seemed to linger still something of their child, and at which neither father nor mother could look without tears. The poor actor did not know where to turn for aid; and before his eyes he saw Désirée's face of tender entreaty. She had never told him what it was that she wished him to renounce, but he had guessed all the same, and the thought that he had not fulfilled his daughter's dying wishes did not lighten his heart.

George Fromont this same night sat in his cheerful library, but he was far from cheerful himself. His head was buried in his arms, and he thought of Sidonie, who was at that moment sleeping quietly on the floor above. For a long time he had implored her not to receive the tenor, Casaboni; but Sidonie would not yield, and that very day had told him that she should certainly invite the man to a ball that she was about to give.

“Is he your admirer?” cried George, looking her in the eyes.

She did not deny it, nor did she say yes ; she did not even turn away. She merely, in her cool, passionless tone, informed him that no human being had the right to control or influence her acts ; that she was free ; that she meant to remain so, and would submit to no interference from either Risler or himself. They had spent an hour in this way.

And it was for this woman that he had sacrificed everything ; it was for her that he had thrown aside the love of his wife ! He was filled with shame and humiliation. He rose from his chair and walked restlessly about the room. His eyes happened to fall on an almanac, and he saw the day of the month. Good Heavens ! Was there not a large sum of money to be paid in a few days, and he had allowed all recollections of business-matters to be swallowed up in his own ignoble personal affairs ! But now he saw all the impending disaster ; he had not a penny. For six months he had lost at cards regularly ; enormous sums had gone in this way ; he literally had nothing left, except the factory ; and at this thought the unhappy man uttered a deep groan.

“ George, I am here—what is the matter ? ” and his wife stood before him. It had been her habit for some time to wait for him to return from the club, where she supposed his evenings were passed ; but this night she had gone to her child. She heard her husband come in, and heard him walking to and fro in the room, and his groan summoned her to his side. What remorse tore his heart as he saw her,

felt her tender arms as she drew his head to her breast! Fortunately, he could not speak, or he would have told her all.

“ You have been playing cards, have you not? and you have had heavy losses? ”

He made a sign in the affirmative, and, when he had regained his self-control, told her that he had a large sum of money to pay in a few days, and did not know where to procure the first penny.

She uttered not one word of reproach. She was one of those few women who can face a misfortune without a word of recrimination. Possibly, at the bottom of her heart she was grateful for the disaster that brought him nearer to her. She reflected a moment, then with a great effort she said: “ Nothing is yet lost; I will go to Savigny and ask my grandfather for the requisite amount.” He himself would never have dared to make such a suggestion; the thought even would never have occurred to him. She was so proud, and her grandfather so hard! It was an enormous sacrifice that she made, and a strong proof of her love that she offered. He felt strengthened and encouraged by her words and by her tenderness.

“ Claire! ” he cried, “ how good you are! ”

CHAPTER II.

REVELATIONS.

“ Ah ! here is Sigismond. How do you do, and how is business in these days ? ”

The old cashier smiled, and shook hands with the master of the shop, with his wife, and his brother, and looked about with some curiosity. It was a shop for the sale of wall-papers in the Faubourg St.-Antoine. They were old customers of the Fromont manufactory. They had begun in a small way, and been accommodated with long credits by the Fromonts, and were now indebted to them to a very large amount ; the Fromonts neglecting to call in their money, as they knew it to be perfectly safe.

Sigismond looked about with keen, inquisitive eye. The increasing business and prosperity of the establishment were plainly to be seen. At the cashier’s desk, behind the grating, sat the wife of one of the sons, with an air of authority on her fair young face. The old man ground his teeth with rage as he thought of the difference at the Maison Fromont ; but the thing that annoyed him the most was, in

what way he could ask for the debt they owed without betraying the pressing needs of his masters. With an air of indifference he began: "Business was good," he said, "but he liked to steal away sometimes and see old friends." Then, catching a glimpse of concealed amusement in the faces of his hearers, he became confused, and took up his hat to go away. On the threshold he stopped. "Since I am here," he said, "you might as well settle our old account." The two brothers and the woman at the desk exchanged a look.

"What account?" And they laughed at Sigismond's joke, as they considered it. He laughed, too—but what a laugh was his!

Then they explained to him that young Fromont had given them a receipt in full, and taken all the money they owed the firm, six months before. Sigismond had hardly the strength to stammer: "To be sure—I had forgotten, good friends. Sigismond Planus is certainly growing old." And with these words the old man departed. The young people looked at each other, and shook their heads sadly, for they understood the affair perfectly.

Sigismond walked down the street as if he were moving in a dream. This, then, was the reason why George never came to him now for money! Evidently, wherever he might go now, he would find that George had preceded him. He would try, however. He went to another of their customers; he half opened the door. "A thousand pardons," he cried, "but will you oblige me with the date of your

last payment to our house? I forgot to inscribe it on my books."

They told him that, five months previous, they had paid everything. He closed the door, and pursued his weary pilgrimage. At that moment, Madame Fromont's carriage swiftly passed him; but Claire, busy with her own miserable thoughts, had no eyes for him.

The task she had taken on herself was by no means an easy one—to ask for a large sum of money from a man who boasted loudly that never in his life had he either borrowed or lent a single penny, and who declared that while he lived no member of his family should receive anything from him! True to his nature, he had given his daughter no dowry on her marriage, and had always been more or less annoyed that her husband had succeeded in acquiring wealth without once coming to him for assistance.

When his son-in-law entered his presence, happy and successful, the old man would say, with a malicious smile, "Wait awhile, the end is not yet!" and sometimes, at Savigny, would look at the house, the stables, and conservatories, and say, "I am soothed, when I think of dying, by the remembrance that no member of my family is rich enough to keep up this establishment when I am gone!"

Nevertheless, with a certain tenderness that is not uncommon in a grandfather who is hard to every one else, old Gardinois would have petted Claire; but she, even when little, was afraid of him. His

roughness repulsed and his selfishness disgusted her, so that, on her marriage, the old man said to Madame Fromont :

" If your daughter wishes, she may have from me a princely gift, but she must ask me for it."

But Claire received nothing, for she never would ask for anything from him. Therefore, the mortification she endured, three years later, when she found herself on her way to implore a favor from him, is more easily imagined than described. Poor Claire ! her grandfather would certainly try her temper and her patience by attacks on her husband ; reproaches and sneers would be lavished upon him. This thought, however, and the one that quickly followed, that she could at least defend the being she loved best in the world, gave her a certain amount of courage.

It was noon when the train reached Savigny ; and, as she had sent no notice of her coming, the carriage was not waiting at the station. She was therefore obliged to walk to the house.

The cold was excessive—the ground frozen and uneven. The chill north wind blew sharply from the river, through the bare and leafless woods ; the lake was black, reflecting the leaden skies above ; while the house seemed to frown her away ; and, in the rough creaking of the weathercock on the stables, she fancied she detected the inhospitable refrain—" Don't come here ! don't come here ! "

Had poor Claire but listened to this advice, she might have preserved her peace of mind ; but she

did not, and was shown into the presence of her grandfather, who was in a small room that he called his office. Seeing his granddaughter pale and shivering, in spite of all her velvets and furs, the old man at once understood that some matter of grave importance required his attention. "What is the matter?" he said, pleasantly enough.

Claire went toward the fire, and, seating herself without even lifting her veil, proceeded at once to lay before her grandfather the occasion of her unexpected visit. She dared not even attempt the ordinary exchange of courtesies, lest she should lose all courage.

He did not interrupt her while she spoke, in a calm, cold voice; but in his eyes could have been read, by an acute observer, a gleam of malicious joy. He thought to himself, "So, these proud Fromonts are humbled at last, and have felt the need of old Gardinois!" When she had finished, he began, of course, with the words, "I told you so! I knew things must come to this termination;" and then, in a hard, severe tone, continued to express his surprise that, when his sentiments were so well known in his family, she should have ventured to apply to him; and finished by flatly refusing to lend her one cent.

Then Claire spoke of her child, who would have to bear the dishonor of her father's failure; but the old man remained unmoved, and even sought to humiliate her still further, for his was that hard, peasant nature that likes to leave the marks of the

nails in his wooden shoes on the face of his fallen enemy.

“All I can say, my dear, is, that you can have a home at Savigny. Your husband may come, too, for I need a secretary, and will pay him a small salary—tell him so.”

She rose in indignation. She came as his grandchild, and he received her as if she had been a beggar. God be praised! she had not reached that point! And Claire turned toward the door.

“Take care!” said the old man; “it is for your sake that I have offered to receive your husband here. You have no idea of the life he leads in Paris, or you certainly would not ask me to assist him with my money. But I am pretty well acquainted with the doings of that scamp your husband. I know where he passes his nights and his days.”

Claire’s eyes grew larger with terror, for her heart told her that she was about to hear some terrible intelligence.

The old man continued: “Sidonie has good, strong teeth!”

“Sidonie?” cried Claire.

“Precisely: and Sidonie has crunched up every bit of your husband’s property, with the full consent of her own good-man, be it understood!”

And coldly and without remorse her grandfather related to Claire whence came the money for the purchase of the country-house at Asnières, for the horses and carriages, and for the jewels worn by

Sidonie—not a detail did he soften—and it was extraordinary how he could have learned so much.

Claire listened with a smile of incredulity, and this smile exasperated the old man. “Ah! you do not believe me—you want proofs! Very well, then, go to Darche’s, the jeweler in La Rue de la Paix. A fortnight ago George bought there a necklace for which he paid five thousand dollars—five thousand dollars on the eve of failure!”

He might have gone on talking for the whole day without any interruption from Claire. She dared not speak, lest her trembling voice should betray her emotion, and the brave woman wished to smile on to the end. At last he stopped. She bowed and turned to the door again.

“Are you going? Why are you in such a hurry?” asked her grandfather, following her out. “Wait for the carriage to take you to the station.”

Claire shook her head and walked on, with her grandfather following her.

Erect, and apparently composed, she crossed the lawn so well known to her from her childhood. Her favorite seat under the tree still stood there, but she had not a thought nor a look for them, nor even for the old dog who ran to greet her. She had entered the house as if she had some claim to kindness and protection. She left it like a stranger, wrapped in her own cares and sorrows.

“Good-by, grandfather.”

“Good-by!” and the gate was closed violently behind her. She stood for a moment and turned to

look back at a spot once so dear to her ; as she did so she caught sight of the little post-box on the wall, and was instantly overwhelmed by one of those sudden gleams of memory which sometimes bring to us each act of our lives bearing on our present joys and sorrows. It was here, three short years before, that she had placed in that box the fatal letter summoning Sidonie to visit her for a month. Why had not something warned her ? "Had I but known," she said—"had I but known!" And she seemed still to hold in her hand that satin envelope. Then, as she thought of her child, she felt a momentary indignation against the injustice of life. But suddenly she said, "No, it is not true!" and as she hurried toward the station the unhappy woman continued to do battle with her own doubts and fears. She at last understood the constant absence of her husband, his preoccupied air and evident anxieties. As Claire reached the deserted station she felt a touch on her hand ; it was the old dog, who had followed. At the sight of this one faithful friend—at his humble and loving caresses, her tears broke their boundaries ; she knelt down on the frozen ground, and, laying her head on his rough coat, wept convulsively. Suddenly ashamed of herself, she rose and sent him home again, with an air so imperative that the poor creature obeyed without delay.

Claire's first thought, on leaving the train in Paris, was to go to the jeweler's who her grandfather said had sold George the necklace. If that

story were true, the others would be also. But her fear lest these details should be confirmed was so great, that she hardly dared enter the establishment. At first she looked at some jewels in their velvet cases, and one would have supposed her, in her elegant dress, as she bent over the ornaments, a happy woman, whose only anxiety was to make a becoming selection, instead of a miserable wife, about to learn a truth that would darken all her future life. For five minutes she suffered pangs worse than the agonies of death.

At last she spoke.

“Ah! yes, madame—perfectly—M. Fromont. We can make you one precisely similar for five thousand dollars.”

“Thanks,” said Claire; “I will think about it.”

A mirror opposite reflected the frightful pallor of her face, and she hurried away, lest she should faint.

She had but one idea—to be alone. Suddenly, without knowing how she had reached it, she beheld the dark walls of the factory before her. By what road had she come? had she walked? She never knew. But the stern reality of her life and her sorrows returned to her as she ascended the broad stone steps of her home. Risler himself was there, superintending the arrangement of the ornamental plants in the hall. It was the night of Sidonie’s ball.

This atmosphere of luxury and *fêtes* pursued her, then, to her own home; it was too much, and she

lost her temper; and, when Risler bowed to her with his usual deference, she looked him full in the eyes, and, with an expression of utter contempt, swept past without one word.

From that moment the course she would take appeared plainly before her.

She hastily kissed her child, and then ran to her mother's room.

"Hurry, mamma!" she cried—"hurry, for we are going away."

The old lady rose slowly from her arm-chair, where she had been rubbing her watch-chain with infinite care; her daughter restrained her impatience and looked about the apartment, and all at once realized the full depth of her own loneliness. Her mother's mind was nearly gone, her husband faithless, and her child too young to sympathize with her!

In a moment the whole household was busy in preparations for this abrupt departure. Claire, perfectly self-possessed, directed all their movements. She determined to depart before George's return, so that when he came he should be greeted by a vacant home and an empty cradle. Where should she go? She had not decided—perhaps to an aunt at Lyons—possibly to Savigny. It mattered little; her first care must be simply to leave this atmosphere of falsehood and treachery.

As she bent over a trunk, each article that she placed in it seemed to be full of memories—there is so much of ourselves in all the trifles which we

see constantly. Sometimes, the perfume of a *sachet*, or the design on a bit of lace, brings the tears to our eyes. Suddenly, a heavy step was heard in the *salon*, the door of which was open—then a slight cough. She supposed it was Risler, for he alone had the right to enter thus familiarly. The idea of seeing that hypocritical smile, that lying face, disturbed her hardly-won equanimity, and she sprang to the door to close it. But Sigismond appeared. “Madame,” he said, mysteriously, “I have come for the money.”

“What money?” asked Claire, who had utterly forgotten why she had gone to Savigny.

“Why, the money for to-morrow’s payments—M. George told me that you would hand it over to me.”

“True, very true; but I have not got it.”

“Then,” said the cashier, in a low voice, as if speaking to himself, “there is nothing for us but absolute bankruptcy!”

Claire started at this fatal word, and staggered, half fainting, to a chair.

For the last few hours her mind had been so absorbed in the ruin of happiness and hopes that she had paid little heed to the ruin of the firm.

But this bitter recollection overwhelmed her now; George would return to find his home deserted, his wife and child gone! And then Claire asked herself what would become of that weak and erring nature, left to face the storm alone?

Her eyes filled with tears, and her heart with compassion, notwithstanding the wrongs she had re-

ceived at his hands. "He will have the right to say," she thought, "that his wife deserted him when poverty and misfortunes were crowding upon him!"

He might say, "Were I still rich, she would have forgiven me." A few minutes' quiet reflection showed Claire the path of duty clear before her; and, when her servants came for further instruction, the sad wife answered gently that she had changed her intentions, and was not then going away.



CHAPTER III.

NOTE TO MEET.

IT was midnight. A fine snow was falling fast, and Risler, wrapped in his cloak, was on his way home from the brewery, where he had supped, for the first time for weeks. His invention had been pronounced, that very day, a great success, and the good man was overjoyed that, with its aid, he could hope to return to the firm some portion of the obligations that his old master, the uncle of George Fromont, had placed him under. His thoughts were happy thoughts, and his step was light. He should exchange Asnières for a larger place farther away from Paris, for Sidonie was growing tired of the toy. Then, Frantz must come home ; this wonderful invention of his would quadruple the profits of the house, while diminishing the labors of the operatives ; and should Frantz remain in that unhealthy country when his brother was living in luxury at home—remain, too, in the power of tyrannical masters, who gave their employés a leave of absence only to cut it short when they pleased, without affording any explanation of their conduct ? for Risler had always felt very sore over the sudden

departure of Frantz, who by his brief visit had revived all the affection of his older brother. Yes, his invention once in thorough running order, and it would not be difficult to find some nominal employment for Frantz in the establishment. As of yore, Risler thought only of the happiness of those about him. Thus thinking, he reached the corner of his own street. A long line of carriages before the house, the group of coachmen sheltering themselves in the neighboring porches from the fast-falling snow, brought to the memory of the good man the fact that Sidonie gave a large ball that night, from which she had graciously permitted her husband to absent himself, on account of "that incessant business." In the midst of all his generous plans for her happiness, the music of this *fête* pleased him, and he had an emotion of gratified vanity, as he saw the second story of the house blazing with lights. Shadows passed and repassed—they were dancing. For one moment Risler watched the crowd through the lace curtains that but half shaded the windows, and then, turning away, caught sight of Sidonie's shadow in a small room off the *salon*. She was standing, as if in front of a mirror. Behind her was a smaller figure, evidently Madame Dobson, who was apparently busy in repairing some disorder of her dress. All this was vague, but Risler recognized the graceful outlines of his wife's figure.

On the lower floor all was dark, with the exception of the glimmer of a night-taper in the sleeping-room. As the baby had not been very well, Risler was

startled, and immediately thought of the singular agitation shown by Madame George, and turned back at once to find Achille, and discover from him if anything was wrong.

The gardener's lodge was full, for the coachmen had crowded around Achille's stove to smoke and warm themselves.

"Is the little girl ill?" asked Risler.

"No, sir, it is not the child; it is M. George. He was taken when he came home this evening. I went for a doctor, who came, but said there was nothing to be done, and nothing needed, except rest and quiet." And, as Risler went out and closed the door behind him, Achille added with a half sneer:

"They are not quite so merry on the first floor as on the second!"

When young Fromont, on returning home that evening, saw his wife, he knew at once by her face that something had happened. He had been so accustomed for two years to seeing his treachery go unpunished, that at first the idea that Claire had discovered his conduct did not occur to him. Claire spoke only of Savigny. "I could do nothing with my grandfather," she said, sadly.

George grew frightfully pale. "I am ruined—I am ruined!" he said over and over again. His sleepless nights, his anxiety of mind, and a terrible scene that he had had with Sidonie, who persisted in giving this ball at this time—this unexpected refusal on the part of M. Gardinois—all combined to prostrate the poor fellow. He had a frightful ner-

vous attack, and Claire gently and compassionately persuaded him to go to bed, and installed herself at his side. She tried to speak to him as usual, but her voice lacked its wonted tenderness. In the very air with which she arranged his pillows and dropped his medicines there was an indefinable change—an indifferent coldness—that her husband felt.

“I have ruined you,” said George more than once, as if to disturb this coldness that he felt so keenly. She with a disdainful gesture seemed to say, “That is a trifle.”

At last he fell asleep, and she sat near, watching him. “It is my duty,” she said. Her duty! There she sat, hour after hour, by the side of the being whom she had so blindly worshiped.

The ball above had begun, and the ceiling was jarred by the rapid steps of the dancers, and the half-sad, half-merry strains of the German dance-music came to the sad wife.

Claire was buried in thought. She knew that the melancholy logic of life was immutable. She did not ask herself why this man had so deceived her, nor yet why for a mere caprice he had thrown away happiness and honor. Sufficient for her was the fact that he had done so. It was not the past that occupied all her thoughts—it was the future.

A new life slowly unrolled itself before her weary eyes—dark and severe, full of privation and of toil—and, singularly enough, this future did not terrify her. What a task would be hers—the care of three children—her mother, her child, and her

husband—for both mother and husband were children! And the longer she dwelt on the responsibilities that would be hers in the future the less she thought of her own sorrows, and the better she understood the full meaning of the word sacrifice—a word so vague from indifferent lips, so full of solemnity when it becomes the rule of one's life.

These were the reflections of poor Claire in that dimly-lighted room, whose one single taper, like a spark fallen from the brilliant chandelier in the ballroom above, had attracted Risler's attention. Reassured by Achille's words, the good man determined to steal quietly into the house, and, avoiding his guests, go to bed and to sleep, if possible. To do this, he was obliged to return to his office to make use of a private staircase. He passed through two or three of the large rooms. The pale moon, now occasionally emerging from the clouds, shone fitfully through the unshaded windows. A strong smell of oil and varnish still lingered there, and the huge rolls of paper gleamed white like shrouded ghosts. Suddenly he caught sight of a ray of light from under the door of the cashier's office. Could old Planus be still at work at one o'clock in the morning? It was very extraordinary! Could a burglar have effected an entrance? At this last idea Risler, moving with great caution, softly opened the door, and was inclined to retreat as softly.

Since Risler's inexplicable break with Sigismond he had carefully avoided being alone with him. His wounded pride prevented him from asking an ex-

planation of the singular coldness that had so hurt him. But this evening Risler was so happy and so hopeful that he felt disposed to make some advances to his old friend.

The cashier was seated at his desk, a pile of books in front of him, and more on the floor at his side. Risler went to the grating. "Sigismond," he said, in a gentle tone.

The old man looked up, and tears—the first he had shed since he was a boy—stood in his eyes. "You are in trouble, my friend. What is the matter?" and Risler held out his hand, but Sigismond drew back hastily. This movement was so sudden, and evidently so instinctive, that all Risler's sympathy changed to indignation.

He straightened himself up. "I offered you my hand, Sigismond Planus."

"And I refused to give you mine," answered Planus, rising.

A long silence ensued; neither of the two men spoke; the distant music of the ballroom came in gusts, as it were, of melody.

"Why do you reject my hand?" at last asked Risler, slowly and sternly; the iron grating, against which he leaned, shaking with the violence of the man's repressed emotion.

"Why? Because you have ruined this honorable house; because in a few hours a messenger will come from the bank, and, standing just where you stand, will present to me notes which, thanks to you, I cannot pay!"

Risler stood utterly confounded.

“I ruined the house? I?”

“Yes, you, sir! and worse than that, you have ruined it through your wife, and you have arranged between you two to profit by our disgrace. I understand your game. The money out of which your wife has cajoled George Fromont, her diamonds, the house at *Asnières*, all stand in her name—out of reach of all danger—and you will in some way manage to evade all liabilities.”

Risler’s lips parted, as if to speak; all his features contracted with an expression of anguish; he swayed heavily forward, dragging with him the iron grating, and fell on the floor. He did not utterly lose consciousness; probably the blood that streamed from a wound on his head relieved the pressure on his brain. Sigismond helped him to the low bench where the workmen sat on pay-day, loosened his cravat, and bathed his temples. When Risler, at last, opened his eyes, he saw Madame George, who had been summoned by Sigismond, leaning over him. “Is it true, madame, is it true?” said the poor fellow, as soon as he could speak. Claire could not answer, and turned away sadly. “So,” he continued, “it is true that the firm is ruined, and through me?”

“No, my dear old friend, not through you!”

“Then through my wife? Ah! this is terrible, and that is the way I have paid my debt of gratitude! But you, Madame George, you have not really believed me an accomplice in such villainy?”

"No, my friend, be calm—I know you to be the most honest man in the world!"

He looked at her for a moment, his lips trembling, and his clasped hands extended imploringly; for all his ways and expressions were singularly simple and childlike. "To think," he murmured, "that I have brought these misfortunes upon you!" Suddenly he rose. "We must not waste our time in this way," he cried; "I must settle my accounts!" Madame Fromont was terrified, for she thought he meant that he must see George, and cried in an agonized tone, "Risler!"

He turned; looking at her, he understood her fears. "Be at ease, madame; your husband may sleep tranquilly; I have something to attend to first, of more importance than my impaired honor. Wait for me—I will return shortly."

He hurried up the narrow staircase, and Claire sat opposite Planus in silence. Some twenty minutes elapsed, when a noise of hurried footsteps was heard, and the rustling of silks.

Sidonie came first, in ball-dress, but so deadly pale that the jewels that sparkled on neck and arms seemed more alive than herself. She was trembling with emotion of some kind; whether this emotion was fear or anger, remained to be seen. Risler was behind her, laden with papers, jewel-cases, and a writing-desk. When he entered his wife's room, he went at once to her *escritoire*, and emptied it of its contents. He found jewels, the deed of the house at *Asnières*, and some certificates of stocks; then,

on the threshold of the ballroom, he called his wife loudly—

“Madame Risler!”

She ran quickly to him—so quickly that no one perceived the tragic meaning of the summons—and entered her boudoir after him. When she saw her *escritoire* open, the drawers on the floor, their contents scattered here and there, she stood aghast.

“I know all!” said her husband.

She attempted a look of disdain, but Risler grasped her arm with such violence that the words of his brother came back to her at once: “It will kill him, perhaps, but he will kill you first!” She had more than an ordinary woman’s fear of death, and made no resistance.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

Risler did not answer. She had only time to throw over her uncovered neck a scarf of light tulle, which she caught from a table as she passed. Her husband thus dragged or rather pushed her down the narrow staircase.

“We are here,” he said, as they entered the office. “Having stolen, we have now come to restore our booty.—Here, Planus, you can raise the necessary sum with this trash.” And with a movement of contempt and loathing he tossed on the cashier’s desk the mass of feminine spoils with which he was loaded.

Then, turning to his wife, he said sternly, “Those jewels, madame, and hurry, if you please!”

She, with the utmost calmness, and with a linger-

ing, caressing touch, loosened the clasps of her necklace and bracelets, where the initial of her name—"S"—looked like a slumbering serpent. Risler, out of all patience, broke the frail chains, and the jewels fell in a glittering heap. "I must do my part," cried her husband, feverishly. "Where is my pocket-book? Have I anything else? Ah! my watch and chain!—Now, Sigismond, we have much to do: as soon as day breaks, all these things must be disposed of in time to meet our payments. I know a man who wants to buy the house, so that is quickly settled."

He spoke and moved as if insane. Sigismond and Madame George looked at him in silence. As to Sidonie, she seemed turned to marble; once only did she move, and then in an unconscious way, only to draw more closely around her shoulders the tulle scarf—the air from the door, open into the garden, made her shiver. Did she hear the music from the ballroom? Was she thinking of the strange contrast of the two apartments? A heavy hand on her arm aroused her from her torpor, and Risler drew her toward Claire.

"On your knees!"

Madame Fromont drew back. "No, no, Risler, not that!" she said, in dismayed entreaty.

"It must be!" answered Risler, sternly; "she shall implore your forgiveness.—On your knees, madame!" and he compelled Sidonie to fall on the ground at Claire's feet. "You will repeat after me, word for word, just what I say: 'Madame—'"

Sidonie, half paralyzed with fear, whispered, “‘Madame—’”

“‘If a life of humility, of submission—’”

“‘If a life of humil—’ No, I will not!” she cried; and, bounding to her feet like a wild creature, and shaking off Risler’s grasp, she rushed through the open door into the silence and darkness of the night, through the wind, and the fast-falling snow.

“Stop her!” cried Claire, in an agony. “Risler—Planus—I implore you! Do not let her go in that way!”

Planus moved to obey her, but Risler caught him. “Let her go,” he said, sternly; “I forbid you to follow her!—I beg your pardon, madame, but we have more important matters than that on hand.—To your books, Planus; we have much to do.”

Sigismond extended his hand.

“You are an honest man, Risler; forgive my suspicions.” Risler did not look as if he heard these words, but turned at once to the books to make a memorandum of the certificates of stock, and an estimate of the value of the jewels, guided by Planus, whose father had been a lapidary.

All this time Claire had been standing at the window, watching the garden-walks, where Sidonie’s footprints were already nearly effaced; and the dancing still continued. Who of the guests imagined that the mistress of the house, with rage and despair at her heart, was flying through the streets of Paris, homeless and forsaken?

Where was she going? Her first idea was to

find Casaboni, whom, after all, she had not dared to ask to her ball; but he lived at Montmartre, and it was too far for her to go there in the dress she wore. Where should she go? Her parents would receive her, without doubt; but she was in no mood to listen to the sobs and lamentations of Madame Chèbe. Then she remembered Dellobelle. In this utter downfall of all her splendors, she thought of the old actor who had first taught her to dance, to move, to hold her fan, and who had been the first to encourage her vanity by his openly-expressed admiration. Something told her that with him she should obtain sympathy. She took one of the carriages that stood by the garden-gate, and ordered the coachman to drive to La Rue Beaumarchais.

For some time Madame Dellobelle had earned a scanty pittance by braiding straw; but Dellobelle continued to grow stout, while his wife, day by day, faded away to a mere shadow. He had just taken the cover off of a bowl of soup, when a knock was heard at the door. The actor, who had returned from the representation of some bloody drama, started as he heard these summons in the middle of the night.

“Who is there?” he asked, in a startled tone.

“It is I—Sidonie! Open quick!”

She entered with a shiver, took a seat in front of the stove, and poured out her rage and indignation in a torrent of words, and in a voice that was subdued only on account of Madame Dellobelle, who was asleep in the next room. The luxury of her

toilet, the shimmering silks and frosty laces, all offered a strange contrast to this dingy room, these piles of straw, and gave the impression of one of those terrible dramas in real life where all ranks and stations are confounded.

“No, I shall never go back there again; I am free at last!”

“But who could have denounced you to your husband?”

“It is Frantz; I am sure of it. He would have believed no one else. Besides, a letter came last night from Egypt. The idea of his compelling me to kneel to that woman! But I will revenge myself!” And a faint smile curved her pale lips.

The old actor listened with vivid interest. Notwithstanding his compassion for “that poor devil Risler” and for Sidonie herself, whom he called in theatrical parlance “the guilty beauty,” he could not prevent himself from looking at the whole affair from an artistic point of view, and suddenly cried out, “What a situation for a fifth act!”

She did not hear him; absorbed in thoughts of revenge, she had drawn closer to the fire, and mechanically took off her satin shoes to empty the snow with which they were filled.

“And now what are you going to do?” asked Dellobelle.

“Remain here until morning, and then we shall see.”

“I have no bed to offer you, my poor child.”

“Never mind, I can sleep in that arm-chair—I am not fastidious !”

The actor sighed.

“Ah ! yes, that arm-chair—it was poor Zizi’s ; many a time she has sat in it all night, when work pressed. Well, well ! those who are taken away are better off than those who are left !” Just then the actor caught sight of his bowl of soup, and remembered with grief that it must be stone-cold by that time.

Sidonie saw his tragic start. “But you were about to sup ; don’t let me disturb you.”

“It is a part of my regular life,” continued the actor ; “a fixed hour for my meals is impossible in my profession ; I must eat when I can and as I can. I know what I should do in your place. I would go on the stage ; you need the excitement of such a career ; besides,” he resumed, as he took his first mouthful of soup—“besides, a success on the boards need in no way impede your success as a pretty woman, nor *vice versa*. I will give you lessons in declamation. With your voice, your intelligence, your appearance, you will have a magnificent future.”

And suddenly, as if to initiate her into the joys of the profession, he exclaimed : “But you have had no supper, and emotion is exhausting ; take this plate—I am sure that you have not eaten a soup so good as this for a long time.”

She seated herself opposite her host ; a faint color came to her cheeks, and her eyes glittered with tears and excitement.

The shallow-hearted creature! Her life, her name, her fortune, were a complete wreck. Honor, happiness, family, were all gone. She had been driven from her home; she had been overwhelmed by every imaginable disaster, by every imaginable humiliation. But this did not prevent her from eating her supper with the best possible appetite, nor from the enjoyment of Dellobelle's jokes, which, stale and unprofitable in reality, were new to her.

She already felt in readiness to start to that new country, the Bohemia, of which she had dreamed, and where she really belonged.

What had the future in store for her, now that she was cut loose from all old ties and associations? Thus wondering, Sidonie made herself comfortable in Désirée's arm-chair, and slept with an untroubled conscience for several hours, awaking finally with her dear plan of revenge fully arranged in each detail.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW CLERK OF THE HOUSE OF FROMONT.

IT was late in the morning when young Fromont awoke. All night, through the drama that had been enacted below him and the ball that had been going on above, he had slept one of those dreamless slumbers, such as sometimes come to strengthen the criminal on the eve of execution, or to soothe the broken spirit of the mourner—such a slumber as one might well pray never to be roused from.

The bright light that streamed into his windows, brighter than usual on account of the white snow on all the roofs and walls, brought George back to the realities of life. For a moment he was bewildered, and with difficulty recalled the impending disaster of the day. He heard the ordinary noises in the streets—the regular jar of the machinery in the factory.

The bell rang. “What! twelve o’clock? How I have slept!”

He felt a pang of self-reproach that he had not been in the office to share the mortification of Risler and Sigismond; and he looked out in the garden, where he heard voices, and saw his partner and the

cashier in earnest conversation. He dressed hurriedly, and, as he left his room, met Claire on the threshold.

“ You must not go out,” she said.

“ And why not? ”

“ I will explain—”

“ Has any one come from the bank? ”

“ Yes; and the notes are all paid.”

“ Paid! ”

“ Yes—Risler got the money. It seems that his wife had magnificent jewels. He sold them this morning, and also the house at Asnières, with all that it contained. But, as there was not time to register the sale, Planus and his sister advanced the money.” Claire did not look at her husband while she spoke, and he, in his turn, did not lift his eyes.

“ Risler is an honest man,” she continued, “ and when he knew from whom his wife had obtained—”

“ What! ” said George, startled out of his self-possession; “ he knows—? ”

“ Everything—and I too—I knew it all, before Risler did.” She drew nearer her husband. “ I was told it at Savigny, with so many cruel words that I would gladly give ten years of my life to forget—”

“ Claire! ” cried her husband, and took one step toward his wife, but her face was so cold, her indifference so great, her contempt so apparent, that he dared not say one word.

“ You find me calm,” said the courageous woman, “ for I shed all my tears yesterday. You may imagine that I wept over our ruin, but you are mis-

taken ; while one is young and strong, such tears are cowardly. No ; I wept over our vanished love, our buried happiness—over you—over your madness that has cost you the loss of a faithful heart ! ”

She was beautiful as she stood before him—more beautiful than Sidonie had ever been. If in other and happier days her face lacked expression, or was a trifle too severe in its classic beauty, the painful vigils of the night had now softened and given it an additional charm.

George implored her pardon, and would have knelt at her feet.

Claire started back. “ If you only knew,” she cried, “ what you recall to me—whose false and treacherous face I have seen at my feet this last terrible night—”

“ But mine is not false ! ” answered George.

Some one knocked. “ You see,” she said, with a bitter smile, “ that the world claims us.”

A servant appeared. “ M. Risler would like to see M. Fromont in the office.”

“ Very well,” answered his mistress ; “ say that M. Fromont will be there as soon as possible.”

George turned to obey the summons, but his wife stopped him. “ Let me go first.”

George demurred. “ Very well,” said Claire, “ do as you please, but if you knew the frightful scene of last night—if you had seen his conduct to his wife—” And here Claire, with feminine malice, stopped, and with feminine curiosity examined her husband’s face.

George was unmoved. "My life belongs to this man."

"It belongs to me also, and I do not wish you to meet him yet. There has been scandal enough under my father's roof. Remember that all the operatives thoroughly understand what has been going on, and all the authority of the overseers was required to-day to get them quietly at their work."

"But I shall look as if I were in hiding."

"And what of that? How strange men are! They do not shrink from deceiving a wife or a friend; but the thought that some one may call them cowardly touches them to the quick. Listen! Sidonie is gone, gone forever; and, if you go out of this house, I shall consider that you have gone to join her."

"Very well," said George. "I will do as you wish."

Claire went down to the office.

Seeing Risler walking up and down the room, his arms folded, and his face as quiet as ever, no one would have imagined that he had had any part in the occurrences of the previous night.

When Madame Fromont entered, Risler shook his head. "Ah!" he said, wearily, "I expected you, but it is not with you that I must talk. We have weathered the gale; but we have still many important arrangements to make."

"Risler, my friend, wait a little."

"Why, Madame George? There is not a minute to lose. Ah! I understand, you fear some mani-

festations of rage from me. No; remember what I said—the honor of the firm must be vindicated before my own."

"Your conduct has been admirable, my dear Risler."

"Ah! madame, if you knew the whole! He is a hero," said poor Sigismond, who, though he dared not speak again to his old friend, wished to show him something of the regret and shame that filled his own heart.

Claire continued: "Good as you are, you cannot be certain of your powers of self-control. Perhaps, in the presence of the man who has—"

Risler took her trembling hands. "Dear madame," he said, tenderly, "do not speak of the evil that man has done to me. I hate him quite as much for the misery he has inflicted on you. But, at present, I think of him only as a partner in certain mercantile transactions, whose opinion and authority I must have before I take certain steps where haste is imperatively required. Let him meet me here, then, at once."

"I believe you," said Claire, and turned away to seek her husband.

The first few moments of this interview were terrible. George was pale and agitated. He would rather have faced a volley of musketry than this man. Risler did not look at him, but continued to pace the room while he spoke.

"Our house has gone through a frightful crisis. The catastrophe has been avoided for the time being.

I have been too much occupied with that invention ; fortunately, all that is happily completed, and I am free, and can devote myself to the supervision of our interests. But you must do the same. The workmen have followed their employer's example, and this morning, for the first time for a year, they have gone punctually to their duties. You must regulate all this. Our patterns are old—I must make new designs. I have great confidence in my invention, and with its aid I hope to set things straight. I should have told you of its complete success, but I wished to surprise you. But nothing can surprise either of us now. Am I not right, George ? ”

Claire trembled, for the satirical tone was so cutting that she feared an explosion, but he continued quietly :

“ In six months I assure you that the invention will yield magnificent results. But these six months will require all our energy, all our watchfulness. We must retrench at every turn, and shrink from no economy. We have five designers : we must dismiss three. I will take upon myself to do the work of those three. In conclusion, I wish to say that, after this month, I dissolve our partnership, and will receive only my old salary.”

Fromont wished to speak, but a look from his wife restrained him.

“ I am your partner no longer, George. You must make no objection—that point is settled. I shall resume my old position until the firm is free

from every embarrassment. What I shall do then depends on circumstances. One word more, George. You must occupy yourself exclusively with your business. The hand and the eye of the master must be felt everywhere, and if you fulfill your duty I am certain that one among our numerous misfortunes is not irreparable."

During the silence that followed, a noise of wheels was heard, and two huge wagons drew up in front of the house.

"I must leave you for a moment," said Risler; "those are the wagons from the auction-room; they have come for my furniture."

"What!" cried Madame Fromont, "you are not going to sell this furniture, too?"

"Certainly, to the very last stick."

"But it is impossible," said George; "I will not permit it!"

Risler turned on him like lightning. "What do you say—you will not permit it?"

Claire made an appealing gesture. "You promised," she whispered.

"True—true!" he answered, and hurried away to escape the temptation that was swelling within his heart.

The second floor was deserted. The servants, having been paid and dismissed that morning, had left the rooms in all the disorder that follows after a *fête*, and over all lingered a certain air of expectancy—an air that generally pervades a spot which has been the scene of a startling drama, and where,

too, the end is not yet. The doors stood widely open ; the carpets were taken up, and the long table in the dining-room was still loaded with glass and china and the remains of the supper. The mingled odors of faded flowers and punch assailed Risler on his entrance. There, too, was the piano, with the music of "Orphée aux Enfers" upon it. The windows were thrown up, and the lace curtains waved in the fresh morning breeze. The whole aspect of the rooms suggested a shipwrecked steamer, whose passengers had escaped only with their lives.

Risler superintended the porters who were moving the furniture. All the luxury that had filled his heart with innocent pride now inspired him with unconquerable disgust. But, when he entered his wife's apartment, his emotion nearly choked him. It was a large room, hung with light-blue silk—white lace and ribbons everywhere—at the windows and on the Pompadour toilet-table. On the floor lay a faded flower, a spray of artificial roses, a bit of lace torn from a flounce. The candles of the long psyche had burned themselves out, and so shivered their crystal sconces. The bed, shrouded in curtains of blue and white, looked like a couch of state on which no one ever slept.

At first Risler felt a spasm of regret, but in a moment his heart grew hot with rage and indignation. Nothing retains so much of a woman's individuality as the room in which she lives. Even when absent, her image still smiles on you from her mirror. Her favorite chair is there, the dainty

work-basket; and the whole atmosphere is filled with her favorite perfume.

But here the thing that most vividly recalled Sidonie was an *étagère* loaded with trifles—a minute china tea-service, a microscopic fan, a gilt shoe, a small shepherd and shepherdess exchanging smiles and bows. This *étagère* seemed to be a representation of Sidonie's character. She herself, her principles, her honor, her ambitions and hopes, were as trifling and as fragile as the playthings on this piece of useless furniture.

Poor Risler's thoughts were sad enough, while all about him went on the noise of hammers and heavy footsteps. The confusion momentarily increased, when suddenly he heard M. Chèbe's voice in the anteroom, and his father-in-law appeared at the door, irate and aggressive.

“What is this I hear, Risler? What are you doing?”

“Selling out, sir.”

The little man glared in a stupefied sort of way. “Selling out! and why, if I may be permitted the question?”

“Because I choose to do so,” answered Risler, in measured tones.

M. Chèbe took a step forward, and said in a low voice: “I do not deny that Sidonie's fault has been most grave. However, I know very little about it. I still must remind you of the old proverb, that it is better to wash our dirty linen at home. It is not worth while, it strikes me, to offer your work-peo-

ple theatrical amusements gratis. Every operative in your factory is laughing at you and watching every movement. Look ! Each pane in those windows has a face behind it. You are the laughing-stock of the neighborhood, my dear fellow !” And Chèbe pulled up his collar with a supercilious air.

“ So much the better. The dishonor has been public ; let the reparation be public too.”

This apparent calm indifference exasperated his father-in-law ; he changed his tone, and began to speak to Risler as one speaks to children and fools.

“ But you have no right to do what you are doing. I shall oppose it formally with all my authority as a father. Do you think that you will be allowed to turn my child into the street ? Not at all, and nothing more shall be taken from the house.”

And M. Chèbe planted himself before the door with a martial air. He was superb in this attitude, but it did not last long : he was quietly seized by two strong arms, and placed in the centre of the room, while the workmen went in and out as they pleased.

“ Listen to me,” said Risler, earnestly. “ I am at the end of my patience. For hours I have placed a curb on my tongue ; but this cannot last, I warn you. You had better leave me. I am in the mood to kill some one ; I give you fair warning !”

Risler’s tone was so full of suppressed fury, in

his eyes blazed so fierce, that Chèbe was convinced that obedience was the better part of valor, to say nothing of discretion. He stammered a few words of apology, as he gradually got nearer the door. On the threshold he lingered long enough to ask if Madame Chèbe's small allowance would be continued.

“Yes,” answered Risler, “but do not be tempted to exceed it, for my position here is no longer the same, and I am not now a partner in the firm.”

Chèbe opened a pair of astonished eyes, but said not one word. Was this man his meek son-in-law? Was this Risler, who bristled all over at the least syllable, and who talked of killing people so coolly?

He slunk obsequiously down the stairs, but at the outer door resumed his usual vain-glorious air, and, when he passed Achille at the gate, was the same pompous little man that had entered.

When every room was empty, Risler took the key and went to the cashier's office.

“Let the rooms,” he said, “and credit the house with the amount.”

“But what will become of you, my friend?”

“Oh! I—I need very little; I will put a bed somewhere up in the attic here.”

George, who was with the cashier, was so overwhelmed by these sad words that he precipitately left the room. Claire, who was also there, laid her hand on Risler's shoulder.

“I thank you, my friend, in the name of my father,” she said, gently.

"It is of him I think, madame, all the time," he answered, simply.

Achille at that moment entered with a large package of letters; Risler took them, opened them, one after another, and then handed them over to Sigismond.

"An order from Lyons, another from Saint-Étienne—" Suddenly he stopped. Among the large business envelopes he saw another, much smaller, sealed with care. He recognized the writing at once. In the corner was written "Personal." It was from Sidonie. Beholding it, he felt precisely as he did on entering her apartment an hour previous.

All his love and all his anger did battle within his heart. Why had she written? What falsehood had she invented? He began to open the letter, then hesitated. He saw clearly that, to read it, he needed more courage and calmness than were then his.

"Sigismond," he said, in a low voice, "will you do me a favor?"

"Indeed I will," answered the cashier, overjoyed to hear once more a kind word from Risler.

"Look here—this is a letter that I cannot read now. I am sure it would prevent me from thinking and acting. Keep it for me, and take this too" (and he drew from his pocket a small package, carefully sealed, and handed the two to Sigismond). "It is all that remains to me of the past; all that remains to me of that woman. I am determined not to see her, nor to see anything that can recall

her, so long as I remain in this establishment. You understand that I need all my head. You must pay to Chèbe his allowance. If she herself should come to ask anything, you will do all that is necessary without consulting me. But never mention her name to me; and you will take the best of care of these things which I intrust to you."

Sigismond placed the letter and the package in a secret drawer of his desk, until his friend should reclaim them. Then Risler returned to his correspondence, but for some time he saw nothing save the long, slender letters traced by the little hand which he had so often, and so tenderly, clasped within his own.

CHAPTER V.

A CONCERT-ROOM.

NIGHT after night Risler's lamp burned until the morning sun shamed its feeble rays. He had furnished for himself, away up among the eaves, a small room, closely resembling the one in which he had lived with Frantz. He worked constantly; but, alas! youth and hope were gone, and with them all the charm of the old life. To be sure, Frantz and Madame George were left him; their love and their friendship were real, and of these two persons he could think without sadness. Claire environed him with kindly attentions, and Frantz wrote constantly. As he never spoke of Sidonie, Risler felt sure that some one had told him all that had happened; and, in his turn, he equally avoided any allusion to the humiliating subject.

“When I can summon him home!” was Risler's constant thought; it was his dream, his only ambition—first, to place the manufactory on a solid basis, and then to recall Frantz, and to pass the remainder of his life with him. The days were all much alike; each morning he descended to the work-rooms, where the profound respect he inspired,

his serious face and decided manner, had restored the order and discipline disturbed for a brief period.

For a time there had been much gossip in regard to Sidonie's disappearance. Some said she had eloped with a lover, others that Risler had driven her away. But the thing that disturbed both of these beliefs was the position assumed toward each other by the former partners. Sometimes, however, when they were alone together, Risler had a sudden access of rage as he remembered how those lips had lied to him—those eyes betrayed him. Then he had a mad longing to seize George by the throat; and to crush his very life out. But the thought of Madame George always restrained him. Should he be less courageous, less strong, than that frail woman? Neither Claire nor Fromont suspected these thoughts; they simply saw a restraint and coldness that were not altogether natural. The operatives were uneasy under the glance of his steel-blue eyes, and felt a profound respect for his gray hairs—for he had grown very gray and very thin.

Thanks to him, the old bell of the factory had resumed its ancient authority; and Risler, kind and thoughtful as he was to the industrious, allowed no infringement of rules. On the last day of every month Chèbe made his appearance, and as punctually was paid three-quarters of Risler's salary—retained by Sigismond in his hands for that purpose. Once or twice Madame Chèbe, who sincerely loved and pitied her son-in-law, made an attempt to see him, but the mere sight of the well-known shawl

put him to flight. Was it that the courage with which he armed himself was more apparent than real? Did the remembrance of his wife never leave him? "What had become of her?" he asked himself, constantly; "where was she?" He wished that Planus would speak to him of her; and that letter, above all—that letter which he had not had the courage to open—haunted him, waking and sleeping. Had he dared, he would have asked it from Sigismond. One day the temptation was too strong. He was alone in the office—the old cashier had gone to breakfast, leaving—a most unheard-of thing—his key in the desk. Risler could not resist this; he opened the secret drawer, but the letter was not there. Sigismond had placed it in some more secure drawer, or perhaps meant to avoid precisely what had now taken place. In reality Risler was glad of this, for he knew only too well that, should he read that letter, his resignation and apparent cheerfulness would come to an end. He managed to endure the week; he rose early and worked hard, and at night slept a sleep of utter exhaustion. But Sundays were inexpressibly painful to him. The profound silence that pervaded the building left him leisure to think. Sometimes he tried to draw, to invent new combinations of flowers and foliage; but, while he moved his pencil, his thoughts rioted in the past. He thought of his utter blindness, of his laughable simplicity, of his irretrievable shame and misfortunes, until his whole soul quivered with pain.

Oh, those fearful Sundays! Remember that he was a son of the people; that he had all their love for the day as a day of rest and of simple, quiet enjoyment. Had he gone out, the sight of a workman with his wife and child would have stabbed him like a knife; but his secluded, solitary life preserved him from these pangs.

Often in such sad moments the door would open, and Claire Fromont would appear. The desolation of the poor man on these long Sundays filled her kind heart with compassion, and she came with her little girl, knowing by experience that children have a strange power to take the ache from sore and wounded hearts. The child ran to her friend with joy and shouts of delight. Risler heard the little hurrying steps, and, turning, would take her in his arms, her soft kisses on his cheek, and her dimpled hands smoothing his worn brow; and then he grew calmer.

Claire smiled gently.

“Come, Risler, my friend, the garden is fresh and lovely. You work too much.”

“No, madame, my work is my best friend; it keeps me from thinking.”

“But, my dear Risler, you must try to forget.”

“Is that possible? One may forgive, but not forget.”

Almost always the child succeeded in dragging him away—he must play with her; but soon his gravity struck even the child, and she learned to walk quietly at his side through the flower-beds

bordered with box. After a few moments, Risler almost forgot her presence, but the soft little hand in his own exercised a magical charm over his ulcerated heart.

“One may forgive, but not forget!”

Poor Claire recognized the melancholy truth of these words, for she had forgotten nothing, while she carefully fulfilled every duty. She, as well as Risler, was surrounded by everything that could keep her wound open. The staircase and the garden had on some days an almost unbearable significance. Even the care taken by her husband to spare her these painful recollections and associations—the resolution he had adopted always to pass his evenings with her; the care he took always to tell her where he had been, whom he had seen—only served to keep alive the memory of his fault. She sometimes longed to say to him, “Do less—say less!”

Confidence was destroyed, and a certain pained smile told sometimes the story of her courage and her suffering.

George was miserably unhappy. At this late date he had learned to love his wife. The generosity of her nature, the strength of her character, had taken him captive. Her cool reserve acted upon his frivolous tastes like the caprices of a coquette. He had always found his wife too loving, too tender. She was always the same, while Sidonie was full of caprices; one day she quarreled with him, the next she was jealous and exacting, the third indifferent.

The peaceful serenity of his wife's affection wearied him. Besides, he had hitherto been sure of it; now he felt that Claire was indifferent, and that the only tie between them was their child. Yet he did not altogether despair. As to Sidonie, he rarely or never thought of her; and let no one be amazed at this sudden change. In these two superficial natures there was nothing that could inspire a profound attachment; George was incapable of receiving any lasting impression—Sidonie equally incapable of making one. It was one of those shallow affairs, born of vanity and idleness, in which neither devotion nor constancy had any part. Perhaps, had he seen her, he might have felt a quicker beating of the heart, but she had been totally swept away in the wind of that gusty night; every trace of her had vanished. It was a relief to live again without perpetual falsehoods, and, though his daily existence was one of much labor and many privations, he was not discontented with his lot. The burden of deception was lifted from him, and the consequent relief was enormous.

Prosperous days were at last dawning on the house. Four of Risler's new machines were in full operation in the factory, and all the establishments at Lyons began to grow extremely uneasy. Finally, an enormous sum was offered for one of the machines.

“What shall we say?” asked George.

“Whatever you choose,” replied Risler. “I am no longer your partner.”

These cold words chilled and marred Fromont's delight. But, when alone with Madame George, Risler said, "Tell him not to sell yet, but to wait awhile." He seemed only to think of them and of their prosperity, not of himself as having any concern with the matter.

Meanwhile orders kept pouring in. The quality of their paper, the prices so much lower on account of their superior facilities for manufacture, made all competition with the Fromont papers simply impossible. Evidently a magnificent fortune was in the future for the house. The factory had resumed its old look of prosperity. A new building was in process of erection, intended to relieve the busy crowd of work-people who filled the older one like so many bees. Planus was busy over his books all day, but his face was radiant with satisfaction.

Risler was always busy, never seeking amusement or rest. Returning prosperity changed no one of his personal habits, nor was he less silent or less reserved. But one day, when the intelligence had arrived that his new invention, a model of which had been sent to the exposition at Manchester, had received the gold medal—the highest prize—Madame George sent for him to join her in the garden, that she might tell him the good news herself.

For the first time a smile brightened his sad face. His pride as an inventor was gratified, and Risler took his friend's hands with a warm grasp. "I am happy, so happy!" he said; but what a difference in his tone!—the words were uttered without

enthusiasm, without hope. He was simply glad to have accomplished the task assigned to him.

The bell rang to summon the work-people from their noon leisure. Risler obeyed also, and returned to his drawing-table.

But he soon came down again, for the news had moved him more than he wished any one to suppose. He wandered up and down the garden, and smiled sadly enough at old Sigismond as he passed the window.

“What does he want?” said the old man to himself, puzzled at this unwonted restlessness. But, in the evening, just as the cashier was locking up, Risler came to him.

“Planus, my friend, I would like—” (here he hesitated)—“you may give me that letter now, with the package too.”

Sigismond looked utterly dumfounded. Stupidly enough, he had fancied that Risler thought no more of Sidonie; that he had forgotten her.

“What! you want—”

“Listen! I can afford to think a little now of my own affairs. Hitherto, I have allowed myself to think only of others.”

“Very true,” said Planus; “now let me tell you what we had best do: The letter and the package are both at Montrouge. Suppose we dine together at the Palais Royal, as we used to do sometimes; for it is not every day that a man receives a gold medal, and we will drink a bottle of good wine in its honor; then you shall go home with me, and

spend the night, and to-morrow at seven o'clock we will take the first omnibus to town. Do me this favor, it is so long since we passed an evening together." Risler consented, not so much to do honor to his medal as to hasten by some hours the moment in which he could open that little letter. He must dress, which in itself was an exertion, for it was six months since he had put on anything but an office-coat.

Madame Fromont was summoned to the window by an exclamation of wonder, uttered by her nurse, and the sight of Risler's bowed form going out of the gate with Sigismond caused her a singular pang, and one which she remembered long afterward.

In the street he received many cordial greetings, which seemed to gladden his heart, while the noise and confusion bewildered his brain.

"My head is dizzy and weak," he said to Planus.

"Take my arm, and don't think about it," answered his friend, gayly.

The two men entered the restaurant, and took a table that stood in a recess of a window, whence they could see the deep green of the trees, and the gay stream of the passers-by. This was Sigismond's idea of luxury—this large room, all gilding and mirrors. As each course was served, Sigismond would insist on Risler's trying it. He did his best, in his anxiety to gratify his friend, but he had little appetite.

"Do you remember, Sigismond?" he said, finally.

"What? The first time we dined here?"

Risler shook his head. "Oh, no. I am speaking of three years since. It was there, in that very room, that we dined three years ago"—and he showed his friend Véfour's *salon* opposite, the windows of which glittered in the setting sun.

"That is so," murmured Sigismond, in confusion; why had he brought his unfortunate friend to a place that recalled to him so much that was painful? Risler, anxious to enliven the repast, raised his glass: "To your health, old friend." He tried to turn the conversation, but a few moments later he himself returned to it.

"Have you seen her?"

"Your wife? No, not once."

"She has not written again?"

"No, never."

"But you must have heard something about her in all these months. Is she with her parents?"

"No, she is not."

Risler turned very pale. He hoped that Sidonie was with her mother, expiating the past by daily labor. He had determined that by what he should now hear of her he would regulate his future life; and sometimes he had dreamed of a future in some far-distant land where the shameful past would be unknown. He had, to be sure, made no plans; but in the depths of his heart some vague idea of the kind had taken root.

"Is she in Paris?" Risler asked, after a moment's silence.

"No, she has been gone three months, and no one knows where she is."

Sigismond did not add that she had gone with Casaboni, whose name she now bore, and that her mother was broken-hearted. Sigismond saw no need of telling these facts, and so sat in silence.

Risler, in his turn, said no more. At that moment the military band, under the trees in the garden, struck up an air from an Italian opera. Risler started, and, turning to the window, listened with pleasure to the cheering tones. When the music ceased, the garden became gradually deserted—a faint ray of the lingering day gilded the distant spires and upper windows—while the twittering swallows clustered under the eaves.

"Where shall we go now?" said the cashier, as they left the restaurant.

"Wherever you please."

Just below, in *La Rue de —*, was a concert-room, where a number of persons were hurrying. "Suppose we go in, too, for a half-hour?" said Sigismond, anxious to cheer his friend, if possible.

Risler made no objection. It was an old restaurant transformed into a concert-hall. Three good-sized rooms were turned into one, divided by gilded columns. Although it was early, there was a crowd assembled. The air was suffocating, and the glare of the gas bewildering. Little tables were scattered about, and at the extreme end of the apartment sat several women in white, upon a raised platform.

Our two friends had much difficulty in finding

seats, but finally succeeded in establishing themselves in a corner, whence only a partial view could be obtained of the platform—at that moment occupied by a magnificent personage in a black coat and yellow gloves.

The public—the small merchants of the neighborhood, with their wives and their *fiancées*—were highly delighted with the romance he was singing; but Risler and Sigismond drank their beer, without paying much attention to the music, when suddenly the cashier exclaimed, just as the romance came to an end :

“ There is Dellobelle ! ”

Truly enough, the old actor was there, close to the miniature stage. He was carelessly leaning against a pillar—dressed with the most punctilious care—his linen was dazzling, and his black coat was decorated with a camellia. He occasionally examined the crowd with the air of a man who accidentally finds himself among his inferiors; but his attention was mainly directed to the platform, where he turned continually with an encouraging smile or gesture, intended for some one whom Planus could not see, on account of the intervening pillars. There was nothing very extraordinary in the presence of old Dellobelle in this concert-hall, and yet the cashier felt a certain uneasiness—above all, when he saw Madame Dobson’s blond curls and pale-blue eyes among the audience. Amid the smoke of the pipes and the noisy crowd, these two faces had the effect of two ghosts, or of illusions in a bad dream. He

felt afraid for his friend, and yet he knew not why, nor what he had to dread ; but he determined to take him away.

“ Come, Risler, let us go ; the heat is intolerable here ! ”

Just as they rose—for Risler was as willing to go as to stay—the orchestra, composed of a piano and several violins, began a singular air. “ Hush ! ” cried several persons. “ Be seated ! ” cried others.

They were obliged to resume their places. But Risler felt a vague discomfort. “ I know that air,” he said ; “ where have I heard it ? ”

Vociferous applause, and an exclamation from Sigismond, made him turn round.

“ Come, quick—let us go ! ” said the cashier. But it was too late ! Risler had seen his wife come forward to the edge of the platform, and bow to the public, with the air of a ballet-dancer.

She wore a white dress, as she had done the last time he saw her ; but the material was less rich, and the whole style vulgar in the extreme. Her dress did not cover her shoulders ; her hair was crimped and waved, until it met her eyebrows ; and around her throat was a necklace of pearls too large to be real. Dellobelle was quite correct in his judgment. She was thoroughly at home in Bohemia, and had acquired that unmistakable stamp—that air of utter indifference to all pure and noble influences. And how perfectly unembarrassed she was !

Ah ! had she seen that despairing, terrible look in those eyes which were fixed on her at the other

end of the room, her smile would have lacked its serenity, and her voice would never have been so smooth as she sang the languishing notes of the only romance Madame Dobson had ever been able to teach her:

“Pauvre petit Mam’zelle Zizi,
C’est l’amou’, l’amou’, qui tourne—”

Risler rose to his feet, in spite of all his friend’s entreaties.

“Down! down!” some one cried.

But he heard nothing, saw nothing, save Sidonie.

“C’est l’amou’, l’amou’—”

continued his wife, with a seductive glance. He asked himself if he should leap on the platform and kill her, then and there! He saw flashes of lightning pass before his eyes, and felt a mad, beast-like anger and rage. But, suddenly, shame and disgust filled his soul, and he rushed out of the room, scattering chairs and tables on his way, and followed by exclamations of amazement and disapproval from the scandalized auditors.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VENGEANCE OF SIDONIE.

NEVER, in the whole twenty years that he had lived at Montrouge, had Sigismond staid out so late without giving notice previously to his sister. Consequently, she was in a state of excessive anxiety. For months she had shared all her brother's anxieties, and this night she said to herself, "It is to be hoped that there is no new trouble at the factory." She had sent her dinner away untasted. And now behold her, in a state of painful agitation, walking up and down her little parlor.

Suddenly, the door-bell rang; but the faint sound in no way resembled her brother's usual assault on that bell-handle.

"Is it you?" she asked from within.

It was he; but not alone. A tall man entered with Sigismond, and said good-evening in a low voice. Not until he spoke did the kind-hearted woman recognize Risler, whom she had not seen since the day when she called upon Sidonie—that is to say, some time before the sad events that had darkened his life. It was with difficulty that she restrained an exclamation of pity and astonishment.

“Listen: will you kindly get my room in readiness for our friend, who will pass the night with us?” said Sigismond.

Mademoiselle Planus arranged the apartment with tender care, for be it understood that, with the exception of her brother, Risler was the only man who escaped the reprobation she lavished upon his sex.

Coming out of the concert-room, Sidonie’s husband had a few minutes of frightful excitement. There was no thought now of the letter and the package at Montrouge. “I must be alone,” he said sternly to Sigismond. But the other would not leave him in his despair. Unperceived by Risler, his friend drew him far away from the manufactory, and the kind heart as well as acute brain of the cashier told him what to say to his friend. During their long walk he spoke only of Frantz—his brother Frantz, who loved him so dearly.

“Yes, there is true affection; you have Frantz always to lean on, Risler; he will never fail you.”

These words soothed Risler almost unconsciously, and he made no objection when Sigismond insisted on taking him to his own house. The old man felt that Risler, on seeing the calm serenity of the little home where the brother and sister lived together, might be led to think of a similar one for himself and Frantz. And, in fact, hardly had they entered the door when the sweet homeliness made itself felt.

“Yes, you are right,” said Risler. “I must think no more of this woman. She is totally dead

to me from this time forward. I have no one in the world belonging to me now, save Frantz. I cannot yet tell whether I shall go to him, or send for him to return to me. One thing, however, is absolutely certain—we must pass the residue of our lives together. He has always been more like a son than a brother to me, and I feel the need of him to lean upon. Once, I longed to die; now, I mean to live—to live for and with my Frantz."

"Bravo!" cried Sigismond. "Now, you are talking like a man of sense, and as I like to hear you!"

At this moment, Mademoiselle Planus came to say that Risler's room was in readiness.

Risler apologized for the trouble and disturbance he had caused. "You are so happy here," he said, "that it seems a shame to bring the burden of my sorrows under your roof."

"But you will soon be as happy as we are," interrupted Sigismond, gently; "you with your brother, and I with my sister."

Risler smiled in a dreamy way. He saw vaguely before him a new home, a peaceful dwelling, Frantz and himself its sole inmates.

"It is late," cried Planus, cheerfully. "To bed with you!"

Sigismond's room was large and airy—simply furnished, but exquisitely fresh and clean. The old cashier looked about it with pride. A glass of water was on a small table at the head of the bed, and a case of razors lay open on the bureau, ready for use.

“Look, Risler, and see if you have all you want. I think everything is here—but, should you need anything, the drawers are not locked, you have but to open them. And just look out at the view; you can’t see much of it to-night, to be sure, but in the morning, when you wake, you will find that it is superb.”

He opened the window—large drops of rain were beginning to fall, and sudden streaks of heat-lightning showed the black clouds, the long line of fortifications, or the telegraph-wires. The step of the patrol was heard occasionally, accompanied by the rattle of a musket or a sabre, and served to remind the listener that he was within the military zone. This was the prospect so much vaunted by Planus—a prospect dreary and monotonous enough. “And now, good-night; sleep well!”

But, as the old man closed the door, his friend called him back.

“Sigismond!”

The good man waited. Risler colored slightly; his lips moved; no words were heard; then, with a great effort, he said:

“Never mind, nothing. To-morrow will do!”

In the dining-room the brother and sister talked seriously and long in low voices. Planus told of the terrible occurrences of the evening, and described Sidonie’s appearance. Finally, one of them locked the door into the garden, and Sigismond made himself comfortable in a small room next his sister.

In the middle of the night, the cashier was awakened by a frightened call from his sister's room.

“What is it?” he asked, starting up.

“Did you hear anything?”

“No, what was it?”

“Oh! it was frightful—a groan, so full of agony; it came from your room below.”

They listened. The rain was coming down in torrents, and rattling among the foliage and on the windows.

“It is the wind,” said Sigismond.

“No, it was not. Hark!”

In the momentary hush of the storm they heard the wail of a human voice.

“Frantz! Frantz!”

A superstitious terror took violent possession of Mademoiselle Planus.

“I am frightened,” she said. “Go and see—”

“No, no, he is thinking of his brother. Poor fellow! but that thought will do him more good than anything else.” And the old cashier turned over and went to sleep again.

In the morning he awoke as usual at the reveille of the forts, for the little house so near the fortifications regulated all its movements by those of its military guardians. His sister was feeding her poultry, but when she saw Sigismond she hurried toward him.

“It is strange,” she said, nervously, “but I do not hear the least sound in our guest's room, and yet the window is wide open.”

Sigismond, somewhat astonished himself, knocked at the door.

“Risler! Risler!” He called again, with some anxiety, “Are you asleep still?”

No answer came, and he opened the door. The room was deadly cold; the window had evidently been open all night. At the first glance at the bed Planus thought, “He sat up all night.” The coverings of the bed were in truth undisturbed, and in every detail of the apartment a night of sleeplessness was revealed. The lamp was still smoking; the glass of water was empty; but the thing that most disturbed the cashier was the sight of the bureau-drawer in which he had deposited the letter and package, wide open and empty.

The package lay on the table, and contained some photographs of Sidonie, taken when she was but fifteen. The simple muslin dress, close in the throat; the hair parted over the pretty forehead; the somewhat awkward attitude, bore little resemblance to the Sidonie of the later days; and it was precisely for that reason that Risler had kept these photographs.

Sigismond was overwhelmed with consternation. “It is my fault,” he said; “I ought to have locked them up. But who would have thought that he cared still? He swore that this woman no longer existed for him!”

At this moment his sister entered.

“He has gone!” she cried.

“Gone? Impossible; the gate was locked.”

"But he climbed over the wall ; it is quite evident, the marks are there."

Sigismond looked blankly at her.

"It is that letter!" he muttered.

It was evident that this communication from Sidonie had given her husband some astounding intelligence, and, in order not to disturb his hosts, he had left the house, like a midnight assassin, through a window. But where had he gone ?

"You will see," said poor Sigismond, as he hurriedly swallowed his breakfast, "that his miserable wretch of a wife has played him some new rascally trick." And when his sister offered him some few words of comfort he shook his head despairingly. "I have no confidence," he murmured, returning to his old refrain.

On the earth, soaked by the heavy rain of the night, Risler's steps were to be seen to the garden-gate. He had gone before daylight, for the vegetables and the flowers were alike broken down by his feet, and the wall was scarred where he had climbed upon it. Once outside, it was impossible to trace him.

"Why need we disturb ourselves?" said Mademoiselle Planus, finally ; "he has probably gone back to the factory."

Sigismond shook his head. Alas ! he dared not give utterance to his thoughts and fears. "Return to the house," he said, sadly, "and I will go farther and ascertain if any one has seen him."

At this particular hour a great many persons

were always to be met on the ramparts and on the road to the forts ; but Planus saw a small group huddled together ; instinctively he turned his steps in that direction. As he drew nearer, he saw a custom-house official sitting on a stone step by the side of the huge iron gate. The man was speaking loudly, and gesticulating with much earnestness.

“ It was just here,” he said, “ that I found him hanging. He was stone dead. If his rope had broken, he meant, I think, to use that razor he had in his pocket.”

Some one in the crowd said, “ Poor fellow ! ” Then another voice, choked with emotion, asked if he were really dead.

Everybody laughed, and turned to look at Planus.

“ You can see for yourself,” the man answered, roughly ; “ the body was carried to those barracks over there.”

The barracks were very near, and yet Planus had the greatest difficulty in dragging himself there. To be sure, suicides were by no means rare in Paris, and hardly a day passed that a body was not taken down from some part of that long line of fortifications ; and yet Planus felt but too sure of what he was to see and hear.

“ Ah ! you have come to look at the suicide,” said the sentinel. “ Go in ; he is there.”

They had placed the body on a long pine table ; over it was thrown an officer’s cloak. A group of soldiers was in the room, and two or three cavalry-officers, all talking with voices lowered as if in a

church; and by the window an aide-de-camp was busy writing.

Sigismond said, gently, "Can I see him?" and, receiving an assenting nod, the cashier walked up to the table. After a moment's hesitation he drew away the cloak from the marble face.

"She killed you at last, dear old friend!" murmured Planus, as he fell on his knees.

The officers drew a little nearer, to look at the dead man, but remained silent and uncovered.

"See, major," said one at last, "his hand is closed on something."

"I dare say," answered the major, as he approached. "Don't you remember at Solferino, when Bordy was shot, he held a miniature of his daughter so tightly that it was with the greatest difficulty we could take it away?" As he spoke, he made an effort to unclose the poor, stiff hand. "It is a letter," he said, and was about to read it, when, suddenly recollecting himself, he handed it to Sigismond.

"Read it, sir; it is, perhaps, the expression of some last wish."

Planus rose from his knees. The room was dark, and a mist was over his eyes. He tottered to the window, and deciphered these words on the torn and crumpled page:

"I love you—I love you more than ever—and forever! Why struggle longer? Our passion is stronger than ourselves."

It was the letter written by Frantz to his sister-in-law, more than a year before. Sidonie had sent it to her husband the day after her flight, meaning to avenge herself on him and on his brother at the same time, and by the same blow.

Risler lived through the treachery of his wife; but his brother's falsehood killed him.

When Sigismond's bewildered brain finally grasped the fatal meaning of these words, he stood thunderstruck, looking through the large, open window with blank eyes which saw nothing.

A clock struck six. Below lay Paris, overhung by low clouds of smoke and mist. By degrees, a spire—a tower—or the white front of a marble building—emerged from the fog. And, all at once, a thousand chimneys belched forth dense volumes of black smoke. The work of another day had begun.

Planus extended his trembling hands with angry vehemence.

“Wretch! ” he cried—“wretch! ”

But no one about him knew whom he addressed—whether it was the fair city of Paris, or the guilty woman who had wrought such infinite woe.



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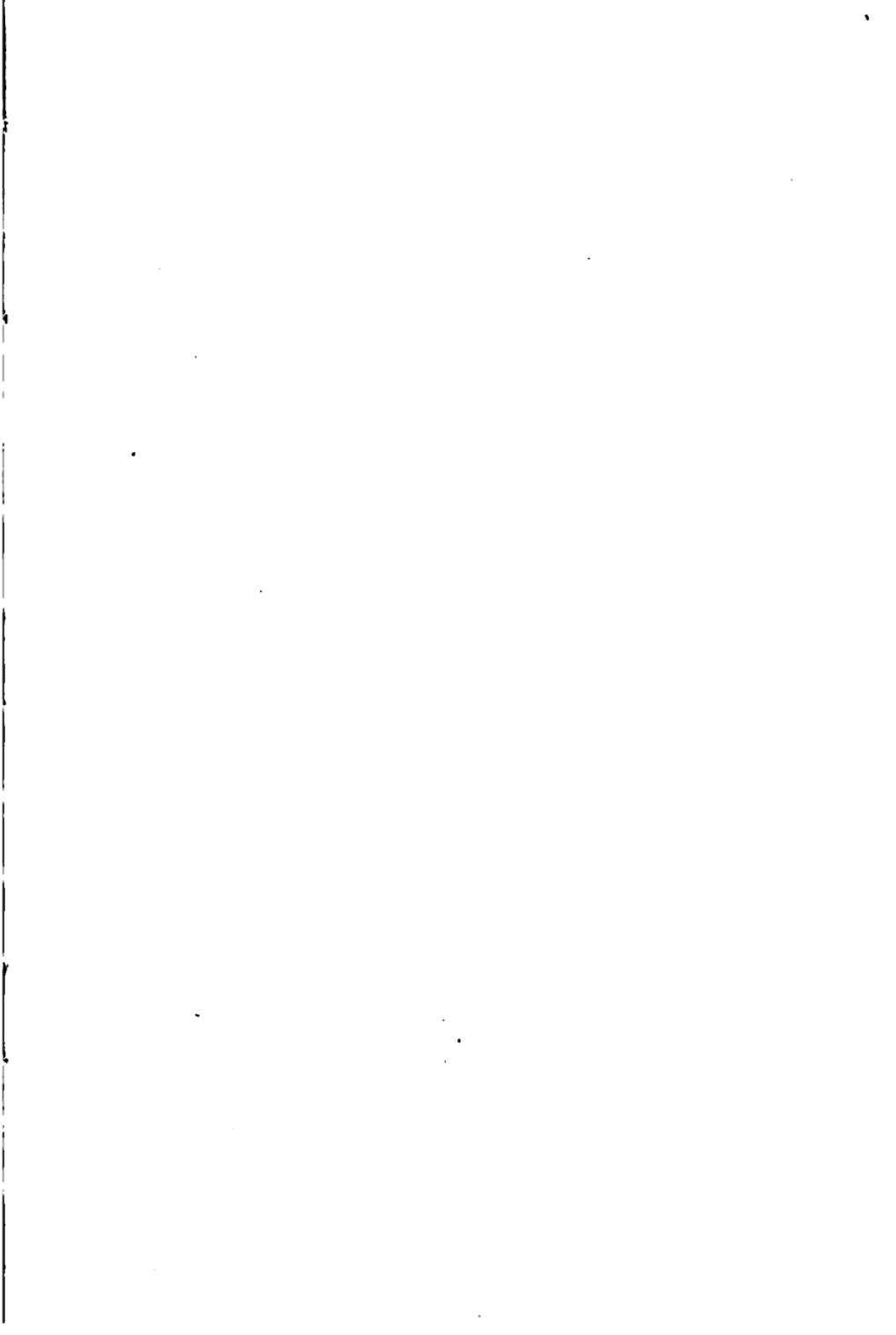
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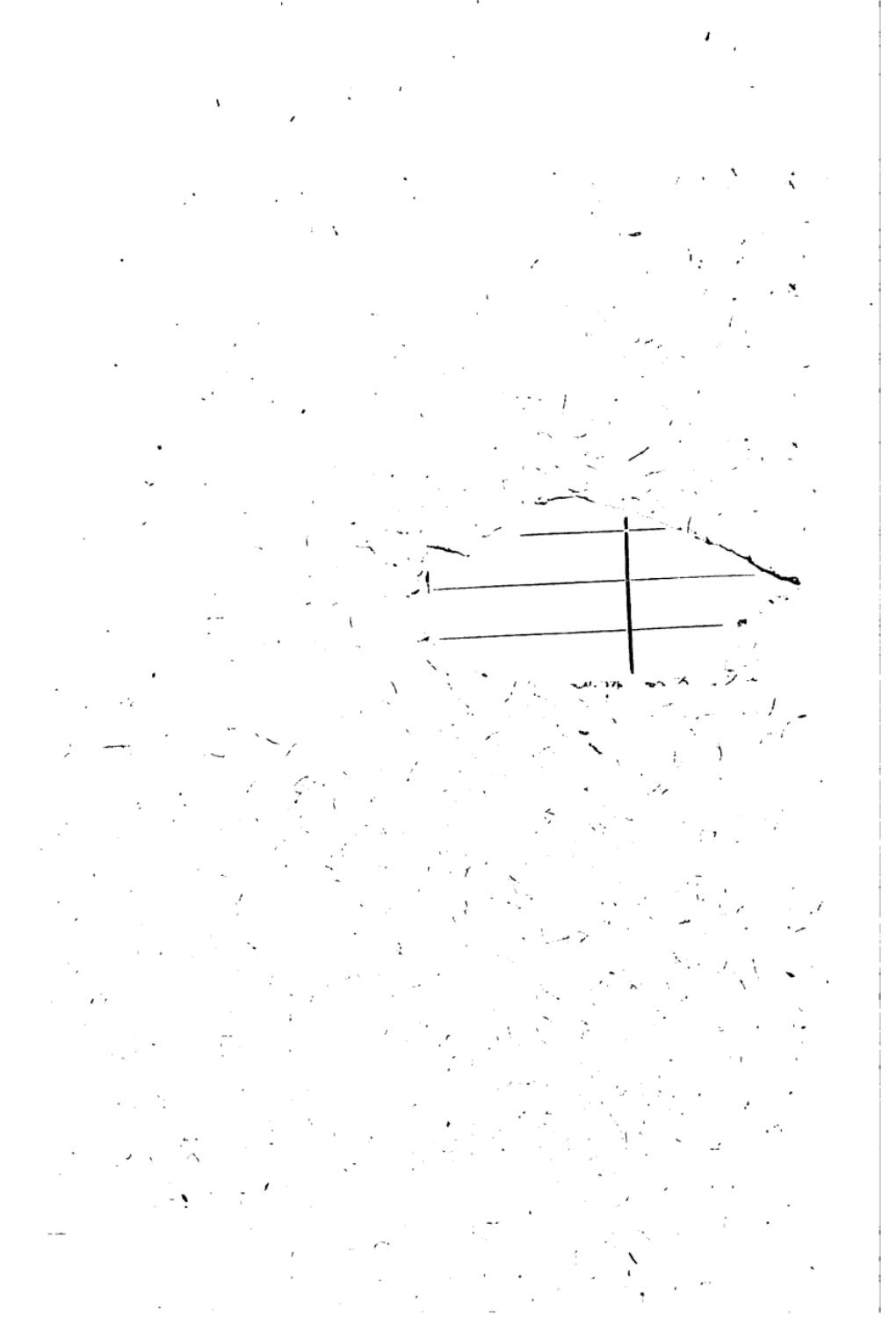
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